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TOMBSTONE TOM, The Arizona Boy of "Sand"; Or, THE HYENA FROM HARD LUCK.

BY MAJOR E. L. ST. VRAIN,

AUTHOR OF "SANCHO PEDRO, THE BOY BANDIT," "REDTOP RUBE," "LEADVILLE NICK," ETC., ETC.



TOMBSTONE TOM PURSUED HOTLY AND THE GRIZZLY SPRUNG AT THE MASKED LEADER WITH A TERRIBLE ROAR.

Tombstone Tom, The Arizona Boy of "Sand"; OR, The Hyena From Hard Luck.

BY MAJOR E. L. ST. VRAIN,
AUTHOR OF "BRIMSTONE BOB," "LEADVILLE
NICK," "REDTOP RUBE," "SANCHE
PEDRO, THE BOY BAN-
DIT," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A TRAGIC INTRODUCTION TO TOMBSTONE.

THE stage from Gold-dust Gulch to Tombstone, Arizona, was rolling steadily on its way, guided by veteran Mose Morgan, *alias* Mahogany Mose. He was a veteran of the ribbons, and when he drove the work was well done.

On this particular occasion Mahogany Mose was lonesome. He had no companion on the box, and but two "insiders," and what little attempt he had made to converse with them had been unsatisfactory. And Mose was just aching to tell some new stories; and who ever knew a man in his position who hadn't a stock-in-trade fit for several volumes?

As they neared Tombstone, however, and he paused to water his horses at a spring, one of the inside passengers climbed to the box.

Mahogany Mose looked at him with satisfaction. True, he was rather young for the company of the grizzled driver, but the latter preferred him to the solemn-faced man inside.

The journey was resumed; the youth made some remark about the weather, which served the threadbare purpose of opening the conversation.

"Goin' ter Tombstone ter settle?" Mose cheerily asked.

"We don't know exactly," the youth replied. "Father has not fully made up his mind."

"He looks ez though he'd made up his mind ter be eternally onhappy. Reminds me o' a chief mourner at a funeral, he does. Solemn ez an owl an' twice ez glum."

"That's because he is in trouble," the youth replied quickly, resentment in his voice.

"Trouble never 'd effect me that way. I b'lieve in enjoyin' myself, trouble or not. But that's a difference o' opinion an' none o' my business. Wal, Tombstone is a right smart place, an' you kin hev some fun thar ef you want."

"We are not in search of 'fun'."

"No? B' mighty, 'tain't none o' my business, but ye don't ketch yer Uncle Dud refusin' fun when thar is a chance."

"You don't understand. We are coming here in trouble, and in a mood such that we could not enjoy ourselves if Tombstone was ten times as attractive as it is. But never mind this. I have heard it said the town has some rough characters."

"Jest an atom, boyee, jest an atom. You shall see when we git thar. You orter get Tombstone Tom ter show ye around."

"Tombstone Tom! Who is he?"

"A kid about yer own age, an' a hull team on ther go. I reckon he comes about up ter my chin, an' I'm a full-blowed lion on ther war-path. Tom is a bu'ster. I'll show him ter you an' you kin go in ez you see fit. What's yer name?"

"Daniel Wheelock."

"Is ther ole man a Wheelock, too?"

"My father?"

"Ther same."

"Certainly. His name is Alfred Wheelock."

It occurred to the youth that Mahogany Mose was a little more free-and-easy about his conversation than he need to be, but if he had known the truth it was because he had evaded all inquiries about himself and father. In Tombstone it was commonly supposed—and with as little truth as is usually the case—that each man knew all about his neighbors, and Mose was a little angry that this youngster with the good clothes and Eastern ways did not at once give his family history.

The stage rolled into the town and drew up in front of the "More Light Hotel," and the passengers at once alighted and went inside.

Sam Jolly, the landlord, said he was glad to see them and there is no room to doubt his statement; and he swung around his nearly-new register for them to put down their names, using a prodigious flourish.

A dozen loungers looked on with what seemed utter indifference.

Alfred Wheelock raised the pen, dipped it in the ink, bent over the register and began writing his name.

"Alfred W—"

So far had he written when the dull report of a revolver sounded in the room and the traveler dropped the pen, threw up his arms and fell to the floor in a heap.

Once down he lay quite still, and the spectators looked in wonder as a pool of blood began to gather by his head. Death by violence was no new thing in Tombstone, but that a total stranger should be shot in the back before he had spoken ten words—and those friendly ones—since his arrival, was a little out of the usual run.

Daniel dropped on his knees beside him, and the loungers started forward in a body. Numerous hands helped to raise the fallen man, but even the boy believed that he was past help. The fatal bullet had gone straight to his brain, if appearances were correct, and such shots bring instant death.

For a while Daniel gave way to his grief, which was most sincere, but he had a strong will and abundant courage in his boyish frame, and his mind soon turned to another channel.

"Who fired that shot?" he sharply asked.

"Fore ther Lord, I don't know," said Sam Jolly. "My back was turned. Who was it, boyees?"

"It come through ther door."

"Somebody fired an' run."

"Guess ther old man was mistooked fur some one else."

Such was the verdict of the miners.

"I'll give fifty dollars to the man who will catch the assassin!" cried the youth quickly.

"By ther Eternal, boyees, we're gwine ter 'arn that pot!" said one burly fellow. "Come on, all on ye. Young feller, do ye go along, too?"

Would he go? The question was an idle one. He was burning to avenge his father's death, and though he had been trained to respect the law and keep it, he could at that moment have taken the matter into his own hands had he secured a sight at the murderer.

Outstreamed the crowd, but at the door they halted. No red-handed desperado was waiting for them to seize him, nor running away, so far as they could see, and some faced one way and some another, but all stood still.

"Which way shall we go?" the youth demanded.

"Which way do you say?"

"How can I tell? I am a stranger here. The man must either have run away or hid himself in some of these cabins. We must look somewhere."

He pushed along in sheer desperation, but he was calm enough to admit that it looked like a hopeless case.

Suddenly, however, they arrived at a cabin before which sat a gray-haired old man, who was cleaning a revolver, and one of the miners jumped up and cracked his heels in mid-air.

"Hyar we hev him!" he cried. "Hyar is ther critter, or my name ain't Sam Slasher! We've caught him in ther act!"

"Right you be!" a second man echoed.

"Hyar is ther very identicle assassinator; I say it, an' I'm a double-soled, copper-toed kipboot, with an easy spot fur corns. Boyees, gita rope!"

The old man, who certainly did not look like a murderer, had looked up quickly, and his thin, gray face turned a more marked white.

Plainly he knew he had cause to be afraid of these rough fellows, and he retreated to the wall as they advanced.

"What is it, gentlemen?" he asked in a quavering voice. "What do you mean? I have not done any harm."

"You've shot a man over at Sam Jolly's, an' we're goin' ter string ye up fur it—that's all," said Sam Slasher, and he again leaped into the air and cracked his heels.

"Gentlemen! gentlemen!" expostulated the old man, "I have not done anything of the kind. I never harmed a man in my life, and I have not been away from my cabin all day—"

"Oh, he'll lie the boots off o' a marble statoo," said the festive man who claimed to be a kipboot, but who was more commonly called Ben Kipp. "Don't waste words on him; git a rope an' raise him up ter fame."

They made another forward move, but suddenly paused as a light form darted from the cabin door, and they were confronted by a leveled revolver, and—the young girl who held it.

She was not more than sixteen years old, but

her form was well developed, and was commonly considered a woman, and a very pretty one at that. Her name was Zoe, and she was the daughter of Pedro Castro, the old man whom she now made haste to defend.

For that was her purpose, and she stepped before him with her dark eyes flashing with indignation.

"Back, you wretches!" she exclaimed. "Advance another step at your peril!"

No one advanced, however; even Sam Slasher and Ben Kipp had a due respect for the revolver so unwaveringly presented. But their anger arose hotly at the opposition.

"Out o' ther way, gal!" vociferated Sam. "I'm a blazin' blizzard from Bloodshot Bar, an' I devour small children like you fur dessert when I eat bufler. Put down ther pop-gun or thar will be a call fur ther undertaker."

"So there will if you come nearer!" said Zoe, unflinchingly. "Once more I warn you—stand back! The man who comes nearer dies on the journey!"

"Child, child, don't be rash—" began old Pedro, but she interrupted him with a short, unmusical laugh.

"I know what I'm talking about, *padre mio*, and you don't. Get inside, and leave me to talk with these men. For shame on you all, to threaten a harmless old man! Young man, I should think you would sink into the earth at being caught in such company."

The last words were addressed to Daniel Wheelock, who was rather glad to be singled out, even in such a severe way. From the first he had had doubts in regard to the justice of the miners' course, for Pedro was the last man to be taken for a typical assassin, and he now removed his hat and stepped forward.

"I beg your pardon, miss, but I think there is a mistake. My friends are a little hasty. I believe there is no evidence against your father, if such he is, and he shall not be harmed unless an investigation proves him guilty."

"Oh, gammon an' green cowcubers!" cried Sam Slasher. "This hyar ain't a courtin' match, an' no kid kin engineer it. Ther sacred majesty o' ther law hez been outraged in Tombstone, an' we're goin' ter right it. Forward, boyees, an' chaw ther Greaser up!"

And the rough crowd surged forward again.

CHAPTER II.

TOMBSTONE TOM TAKES HIS TURN.

"PULL up or tumble down. Attention, company; ground arms—halt!"

The words rung out sharply on the air, and a lithe, boyish form bounded to Zoe's side, and Sam Slasher and his friends found themselves confronted by two more revolvers.

They were held by a youth shorter in stature than Zoe, but his thin, beardless face was keen and clear-cut, and one reason why the burly miners paused so suddenly was that they had seen him before.

"Jest you stand whar you be an' let ther moss grow atween yer toes!" directed the new-comer. "I'm around hyar ter take my turn, an' ye know steam is up when my whistle blows. I'm Tombstone Tom, an' I'm a bad man boiled down. Don't git took in on ther size o' ther parcel, fur I'm all sand from my middle toe ter my back teeth. This hyar caucus had better break up afore I break it up!"

Daniel Wheelock stared in amazement. The new-comer rattled off his proclamation without a pause for breath, and though Daniel had at first expected to see him beaten down at once by Sam Slasher, that fellow and his tribe really retreated, and seemed concerned about their own safety.

"Now look hyar, Tombstone Tom," said Sam, "what call hev you ter chip in? This ain't yer funeral—"

"No, nur 'tain't ther right sort o' weather fur funerals, anyhow. Men stick ter earth when ther sign is in ther brain, an' hyar sticks old Pedro. You let him alone! You hear me? Git back ter Jolly's an' fill yer whisky-casks up. Ef one o' ye advances, I won't leave enough on him ter butter a pancake with."

Daniel expected to see the youth wiped out of existence, but the result was just to the contrary.

The burly miners seemed to swallow their wrath with an effort, and one and all turned and slunk away, their faces toward Jolly's. The bold boy had cowed them all.

But Daniel remained. He remembered that Mahogany Mose had spoken well of Tombstone Tom, and there was that in the face of the youth which attracted his companion.

But he saw Zoe looking at him with indignant eyes.

"I thank you heartily for interfering here, Tom," he said, "for matters were taking a most unpleasant turn. And you, young lady, I trust you will not judge me by those rough men."

"You tried to take my father's life!" began Zoe, her cheeks flushed with anger; but Pedro interrupted her.

"No, no, my dear Zoe; you are mistaken. He spoke for us, and I am sure he is a fine young man. But perhaps he can tell us what the trouble was about."

Daniel's face fell; the words recalled the tragedy at Jolly's hotel; and in a broken voice he told what had occurred since his arrival at Tombstone.

His sorrow was so genuine that Pedro shook his head sadly, and Zoe promptly apologized for her hasty words.

But Tombstone Tom looked more wise than sympathetic.

"I ketch onter the hull game: Sam Slasher an' Ben Kipp was feelin' rusty an' liquor-soaked, an' they ketched onter ther fu'st critter they see'd, which was you, Pedro. But don't you be afeerd. 'Most likely they'll forgit all about ye in half an hour, an' ef they don't 'twon't make no diff'. They know I've took my turn an' they won't meddle with small-pox on ther half-shell—that's me. Dan, if you'll waltz aside with me, we'll confab."

The invitation pleased young Wheelock. Each moment in the company of the Tombstone boy gave him fresh respect for his ability, and if he could bluff half a dozen toughs, he might also throw light on the murder mystery.

They left Castro and his daughter and went to a remarkably small cabin fifty yards away.

"Hyar's my bower," said Tombstone Tom. "Tain't 'zactly ekull ter a Gov'ment edifice, but it's ther abode o' innocence an' fleas. Look out for the latter, 'cause they ain't muzzled, an' I ain't had time ter pull ther teeth. Sot down on ther floor an' let yer heels hang over. Now, d'ye know what I think?"

"No."

"That shootin' was did ter order."

"What do you mean?"

"It wa'n't no accident, nur no practice shoot, but somebody had a motyve an' they worked in 'thout delay. See?"

"Not clearly."

"Wal, I b'lieve Sam Slasher and Ben Kipp could tell more about it than they let on. They ain't so big fools ez they pretend. Now, they say that shot was fired through ther door. I say it was not."

"No?"

"No. Tain't Tombstone natur' ter act ez they did, under sech sarcumstances. When this hyar town hears a revolver bark they ginerally go to see what is hit, an' ef that shot had come in through ther door you'd seen every knock-kneed beetle waltz out on ther run ter see who fired it. An' you say they all stayed in."

"But where was the murderer, if not by the door?"

"Inside ther room!"

"What?"

"Jest ez I say," Tom coolly replied. "You take my word, the shooter stood in ther room an' Sam Slasher an' his gentle antelope knows who 'twas."

"Then I have been terribly deceived."

"Pears like you hev. Sam Slasher pulled wool an' it flopped over your eyes. That's ther idee."

"But why should strangers wish to harm my father? He had never spoken to any one in the place."

Tombstone Tom arose, found his lamp and struck a light before he answered, and then sat down where the reflection fell full on his sharp face.

"It is ther opinion o' this hyar court that ther case ain't fully developed yit; but I kin see ther grindstone an' I know thar is a hole in it. Mebbe yer dad didn't make no enemy in Tombstone; but he may hev done so afore he come ter town a-ridin' on a pony. Sech things is common as fleas—did you get a bite?"

"I think I—did. Are there really fleas here?"

"Millions on 'em. Reg'lar Anglo-Saxon tweezers. They hev nippers eleven inches long an' they file 'em every day. But ter resume. Whar else has yer dad had trouble? Mebbe 'way up in Deadwood, an' ther feller came hyar ter salivate him."

"On the contrary, we have just come from Virginia."

"Possible? Must 'a' follered you hyar, then. But, say, why did you come?"

"To search for my uncle, who mysteriously disappeared near here not long since."

"Aha! now you talk. What was his cognomen?"

"Orlando Wheelock."

"Don't know him. Sure he came here?"

"Well, he wrote to us he had purchased half of a gold mine here, and should go on at once from Hard Luck, the town from which he wrote; but after that we never heard a word, and when my father could bear the suspense no longer we left home and hastened here."

"Ter look up ther missing uncle?"

"Yes."

"I see a light in ther winder. Wal, what mine did yer uncle buy inter?"

"We do not know. He merely said he had purchased a half-interest in a mine, and though it had cost him a good round sum, he hoped to get it back, and that he should start for here the next morning."

"Hev you been ter Hard Luck?"

"Yes. He left there as he intended; but they know no more of him."

"Gobbled by Apaches, like ez not."

"No, for he was met by a man who knew him when within two miles of Tombstone."

"Wal, he never got hyar, or I'd 'a' knowed on't. I know every human clothes-pin in town. Hev ye got it figured out?"

"No."

"Wal, I hev."

"What is your theory?"

"Orlando Wheelock was put outer ther way afore he could claim ther mine he bought inter, an' whoever did it had one eye open fur yer dad, an' knowin' what he was hyar fur, dropped him afore he could begin ter investigate. Moreover, ther riptyle that did it stood inside Jolly's saloon when he shooted, and some o' them toughs was ther shootist!"

Tombstone Tom stated the case with an earnestness which left no doubt of his sincerity.

"It may have been Sam Slasher."

"Jes' ez likely ez not."

"By George! he shall be made to tell what he knows. I will have him arrested!"

"Sing low, sing low, pard Dan. Thar ain't no sheriff in this hyar city now; ther orfice hez been vacant ever sence ther boyes planted Abe Keeler under ther daisies, an' nobody don't aspire ter it. Now, you turn yer ear inside out an' hear me whoop. Ther way ter git at Samivel is ter slow-track him."

"How is that?"

"Go soft an' easy an' watch fur him ter give himself away. That thar is ther way. Seem not ter suspect, but watch ther critter like a cat."

"I'm afraid I am not equal to it, Tom."

"Wal, I consait I am. I never see'd ther job yet what I couldn't try, an' when I do try ther rattlesnakes take off ther rattles. I don't ginerally meddle with other folks' corn-cribs, but ef you say ther word, I'm ther plum fur your puddin'."

"Will you help me?"

"That's what I jest said, hain't it?"

Dan reached over and grasped his companion's hand. Though the elder of the two, he knew he was by far Tom's inferior in practical experience and knowledge of Western ways, and he felt a confidence few young fellows of Tom's age could inspire.

"I thank you a thousand times—"

"Better wait until the work is done," dryly observed the Tombstone boy. "It's ther winnin' boss that usually gits ther oats, an' ther ole style is good enough fur me."

"But how are we to proceed?"

"We must let ther blind cat jump."

"I don't understand."

"Be governed by sarcumstances an' go easy, keepin' both eyes open an'—"

Tombstone Tom suddenly ceased speaking, dashed out of the cabin like a flash and disappeared.

Then followed a startled exclamation.

CHAPTER III.

TOMBSTONE TOM DROPS ON SOMETHING.

As soon as Dan Wheelock could recover from his surprise he followed Tom, and in the dim light saw him holding some one who was a woman, if appearances went for anything.

"Let me go!" said a feminine voice sharply.

"Take your hands off me, or I'll use a knife!"

"No, you won't, my condensed sugar-plum," Tombstone Tom cheerfully answered. "'Ka'se why? I've got yer wrists in limbo, an' people can't carve steak 'thout them usef' members. Come in hyar, Meg Low, an' let ther kerosene flicker on yer dusky cheeks."

He dragged her into the cabin, and Dan, following, saw a girl of about sixteen years. Her complexion, hair and eyes indicated that she

had Indian blood in her veins; but she was decidedly pretty in spite of that, and decked out in a good deal of cheap finery, whereof a red-skirt and profusion of ribbons were the chief attractions.

She no longer struggled, but with downcast eyes and pouting lips, stood sullenly in his grasp.

"I say, Meg, this ain't ther squar' thing," observed Tom.

"What ain't?" she demanded, moodily.

"To come a-spyin' on two gents that way."

"I ain't spied on ye!"

"Wal, you've got ther giant gall! I ain't ketched you at it, hev I?"

"I was only passing, and I stopped for a moment."

"For a 'moment,' hey? Wal, I never knowed jest how long a space o' time a moment was, but ef it kivers five minutes my watch is off her pivot. Now, don't ye lie ter me, Meg."

"You never believe me, Tom."

"Kase I never knowed yer ter tell ther truth," was the frank explanation. "Ye come o' a bad fam'bly, what thar is on't, an' thar's enough o' ther suspecies, Lord knows. Meg, I'm afeerd yer strugglin' in ther bounds o' sin an' wormwood."

Tombstone Tom stroked his upper lip as though he expected to find a mustache blooming there, and assumed a very mature air; but Meg did not answer. She stood with downcast eyes, and Dan saw her lips tremble and tears glisten in her eyes.

"You are too hard, Tom—"

"Not a bit on't. Ye don't unnerstand ther female sex ez wal ez I does, 'spechially ther idiotsyncrancies o' a flighty young gal like Meg Low."

"I'm as old as you are!" flashed the girl.

"Jedgin' by ther chronometer. But, ye see, young woman, ther male sex is ther s'perior o' ther female, an' has b'en ever sence ther flood. But, ter business. Meg, why did ye spy on us? What new game has Jack Low got in mind?"

"None. Or if he has, I sha'n't help him."

"No? Do ye mean ter say he didn't send ye ter listen ter our confab?"

The girl hesitated for just a moment.

"Yes, I mean to say so," she then replied.

"Young woman, I'm s'prised at ye! What d'ye take me fur? Kin you expect ter deceive a gent o' my vast experience?"

"That's it!" she cried bitterly; "abuse me as you always do, just because I have Apache blood, call me all that's vile and bad, and accuse me of every crime. I'm no good 'cause I'm quarter Indian and Jack Low is my father."

"I'm mighty sorry, but you tell ther truth," said Tom, philosophically. "You're a precious bad case, Meg; a bad man from Hard-shell an' all creation on ther lie. If I was you, Meg—Hillo!"

Tombstone Tom stopped short as the girl turned and darted out of the cabin like a flash. He followed with a little less celerity, Dan Wheelock remained behind, undecided what to do, but in a few minutes Tom returned.

Quick and sharp as he was he had been beaten in the race, and he had to come back alone.

He sat down and explained that Meg was the daughter of a half-breed settler: a man who was supposed to be as hard a character as ever stood on shoe-leather in the city of Tombstone; and then the young men devoted their attention to business again.

One of the best-known citizens of Tombstone was Colonel N. Paul, owner of the Yellow Jack Mine. He was one of the few men in town who always wore good clothes, and had an education to match, and in a good many instances such men were not popular in Tombstone, but the colonel had a way of getting along with the rough classes which few understood.

Really, he did more for himself by humoring their fancies than anything else, and while other men in his position were cordially hated, he was pronounced a good fellow.

He had a son, Nelson, by name, who was as effeminate as any product of the East, but for his father's sake the young fellow was tolerated by the roughs. Among the respectable element he had few friends, however, for he was as vicious as a wasp, and liquor was fast undermining what vitality he possessed.

On the same evening before referred to Colonel Paul was seated in a room called his library, though there wasn't a book in it, when his colored servant announced a visitor.

Paul made it a point to receive every one who called, and the man was soon at hand. He proved to be a tall, dark-faced person of about

thirty-five years, with a big mustache and a pointed goatee which gave him a sort of brigandish look.

Moreover, he was a stranger to Paul.

"Good-evening, sir," said the latter. "Please help yourself to a chair. Fine weather we are having."

"I really haven't noticed," replied the visitor, in a deep voice, "but I'll take your word for it. I came on business."

"Ah! Well, I am at your service."

"You are Colonel N. Paul?"

"Such is my name, sir."

"Good! Well, I have called in regard to one Orlando Wheelock, formerly of Hard Luck, now of worse luck."

Paul's face changed expression quickly and he seemed to brace himself up as one does when he expects an attack.

"What about him?" he asked.

"Just what I want to know. Where is the man?"

"Really, I am unable to say."

"You ought to know."

"Still I don't. Allow me to ask who Orlando Wheelock is, and what you and I have to do with him."

The visitor smiled grimly.

"You are very cautious, colonel, but I can't say I blame you. Under the circumstances it is not only natural but prudent. Now, we won't lose any time by fine sword-playing, but come right down to business. Isn't that the best way?"

"Certainly, and, first of all, it would be very appropriate for you to mention your name, I think."

"True. Well, my Arizona name is Albert Hardy. But, to return to the case of Orlando Wheelock: Some weeks ago you met him in Hard Luck and sold out one-half of the Yellow Jack Mine. He paid cash, the papers were drawn and you returned to Tombstone. He was to join you here on a certain day, but he never came."

"Allow me to ask what all this is to you?"

"Easily told. I am Orlando Wheelock's brother and my name, in reality, is John G. Wheelock. Of that we will say nothing; in Arizona, I am Albert Hardy. But you will now see why I am interested. I am the heir of Orlando."

Paul had listened with close attention, and on his face was a troubled look, mixed with doubt.

"Granting all this to be true, I don't see why you come to me to inquire for your brother. I know nothing about him."

"I beg your pardon!"

"What do you mean by that?"

"'Twas my polite way of calling you a liar. I believe you know all about him; I believe that, having received pay for the half of the Yellow Jack, you took measures to prevent Orlando from claiming his property. It is known that he came safely over the plain until so near that no Pache could molest him. Then, he disappears in the suburbs of Tombstone, completely and mysteriously. All this carries its deduction, and I charge you, Colonel N. Paul, with having put him out of the way for the purpose before outlined."

And then Mr. Hardy leaned back in his chair, thrust his thumbs into the arm-holes of his vest and looked at his companion with a determined way far from pleasant.

The colonel, on his part, was ill at ease, and his forehead was covered with perspiration, but he tried to brave it out.

"How dare you insinuate anything of the kind?"

"Truth is mighty and must prevail."

"Sir, I know nothing about the man!"

"Sorry to cast a doubt on your veracity, colonel, but the bivalve won't slip down."

"Do you think I am such a villain as to put a man out of the way for a few paltry thousand dollars?"

"I do, colonel."

Paul sprung to his feet and fixed his gaze on a revolver a few feet away, but Hardy shook one of the same species out of his garments somewhere and turned its muzzle toward the colonel.

"Sit down, N. Paul, sit down!" he said, coolly; and the colonel felt that politeness—and safety—required obedience.

"This is infamous!" he exclaimed.

"Just what I think. Now, I don't care so very much because you have wiped out Orlando, for he and I never hitched well, but it is infamous for you to gobble the Wheelock dollars. I've come for them, colonel!"

Paul did not answer at once. He began to see what his visitor was driving at; money, not

fraternal feeling, moved him; and the nature of the colonel was such that he could deal better with a rascal than with an honest man.

"You suggest a compromise, eh?"

"Well, I'll throw off five thousand on the total if you'll cash over the rest and make no trouble."

"But suppose Orlando then appears?"

"You ought to know that he won't."

"Confound you, I know nothing of the kind!"

"We won't argue that point."

"Nor we won't leave it too hastily. What assurance have I that this is not all a plot to rob me of fifteen thousand dollars by means of a wild-cat yarn of yours?"

CHAPTER IV.

NELSON PAUL COMES TO GRIEF.

HARDY remained perfectly cool.

"You'll have to take my word to a certain extent," he answered, "but you're not in a position to kick over the traces. It is an open question whether you treat quietly with me or take your chances in court."

"What proof have you that Orlando Wheelock ever came near Tombstone?"

"He was seen near here by two men. One was your esteemed fellow-citizen, Jack Low, the half-breed, while the other was a man whose identity will not be revealed just at present. I mention Low to let you see I am not dealing in shadows; I keep back the other name so you can't tamper with my witnesses."

Paul winced. He was just thinking of bribing Jack Low to hold his tongue.

"Of course you will give me some time to consider this matter," he slowly said.

"What need is there of that?"

"A good deal. Your charge that I know what has become of Orlando Wheelock is ridiculous. I do not know, and no harm has come to him through my means. Still, if he is dead, I am willing to pay over the money, to the next of kin. I want to be fair, but you can hardly expect me to hand over fifteen thousand dollars to an entire stranger."

"I have the papers here to prove that I am John G. Wheelock, brother of Orlando."

"No doubt you are, but I must have three days' grace."

Paul spoke with firmness, and Hardy yielded without much remonstrance. It would be hasty for the mine-owner to cash over so large a sum without due assurance that all was right, and the visitor thought prudent to give him time to think it over.

Consequently, he only paused to say he might be found, a portion of the time, at Jolly's hotel, and then took his leave.

The minute the door closed the colonel's usually calm face assumed a look of vengeful fury.

"What fiend's luck has sent this scoundrel here?" he demanded. "I thought I had raked in Orlando Wheelock's thousands safe and sound, and now pops up this fellow. Is he a Wheelock or isn't he? Cursed if I know, but I'll kill the whole family rather than give up what I have. I've schemed too much to lose all now, and as I can stir Tombstone to a blaze when I see fit I don't imagine any outsider can come in and run this court while I'm not on the bench. I'll wipe out the whole gang that tries it!"

In the mean while Hardy had left the house, but he had not gone many yards before he was accosted by a tall, bony-looking man of Indian characteristics. Hardy recognized him at once despite the darkness.

"Jack Low!"

"Yes. What have you been?"

"To Paul's."

"What did he say?"

"All is as well as we could expect."

"Wal, ther blue blazes is ter pay in another quarter."

"How so?"

"A man an' youngster rived by Mahogany Mose's stage this afternoon, an' they claimed ter be ther brother an' nephew o' Orlando Wheelock."

A startled exclamation fell from Hardy's lips.

"If that's so, our jig is up. But, hold on; can't we abandon our claim and play into the brother's hands?"

"Hardly, fur he's dead; dropped with heart-disease in Jolly's saloon."

The half-breed chuckled at what he thought his wit.

"By George! there may still be hope. How old is the youngster?"

"Seventeen or eighteen."

"We will put him out of the way."

"I was thinkin' o' that, an' I've sent Meg away ter size ther sittervation. Come down ter ther cabin an' let's hear her report."

Meg Low reached her father's cabin, after running away from Tombstone Tom, a good deal out of breath but able to run further if necessary. She was as strong as a young deer.

Entering the wretched cabin she found it dark and deserted, but she struck a light and sat down to await her father's return.

She fell into deep thought while thus engaged, but her expression was not a happy one. People said the girl was bad-hearted, sullen and morose, but few, or none, understood her.

She was still thus engaged when a shadow fell at her feet, and looking up she saw a young fellow of nineteen or twenty years, but one who lacked the strength and solidity of the majority of Western boys. Instead, he was slightly built, and this, with a pale, thin face gave him almost an effeminate appearance.

Yet he had an evil, vicious and dissipated look, and Meg, recognizing Nelson Paul, knew she had for a visitor a person more to be feared than Sam Slasher or Ben Kipp.

"Hello, my darling!" quoth Nelson, with a sort of hiccupping laugh; "how blooms the red, red rose of the Apache reservation and Manga Colorado dynasty?"

Meg saw he had been drinking heavily, and though not frightened, she was troubled. He was Colonel Paul's son, and the colonel wielded a good deal of power at the town.

"I am quite well," she said, coldly.

"I'm glad of it, my peach-cheeked caramel on ice," chuckled the vicious young rascal.

"Dash me if I like visit rich folkses, b'mighty! I like the rosy hue of health a-flickering along the carnation cheeks of beauty. Meg, my darling, come here and kiss me!"

"Not much. I'd sooner kiss a toad."

"Kiss both, if you want to, but I take my turn first, and here goes to do it!"

He spread out his arms and advanced, while Meg retreated toward the corner. Some girls would have felt honored by notice from a rich man's son, but not she. For Nelson Paul she felt only disgust and hatred.

"You had better stand back!" she cautioned him. "I don't want anything to do with you, and I won't be bothered. Get out of the way you brute!"

He had now advanced so near that she was obliged to do something. She was tempted to use the revolver she always carried, but she thought better of it; it would only get her into trouble, and she really did not wish to harm the poor fool.

Consequently, she dodged quickly under his arm and made for the door, but he was too quick for her and cut off her retreat. But the attempt stirred up all of his ugliness.

"See here, Meg Low!" he cried, "you don't want to put on any airs with me. I'm a rich man—what are you? A mere beggar's brat, with Apache blood in her veins. Bah!"

"If I was you I'd keep away from such a person!" retorted the girl, her eyes flashing. "Nobody wants you 'round here, Nelse Paul, and the sooner you get out, the better. There's the door, and you'd better amble."

"Not till I've had a kiss, by Judas!"

"You lay a hand on me and you'll be sorry. You ain't no match for me, Nelse Paul, and you know it. Just keep away or I'll serve you as I would a rattlesnake!"

All her blood—the Apache fire—was up and, as she stood there, her eyes flashed in a most ominous way, but young Paul was not in a mood to learn caution.

"By the fiends!" he cried, "I'm going to humble you, my girl. I've seen your plump, red cheeks, and as you please my eye I'm going to have you for my own. I know a good thing when I see it. Besides this, I reckon Colonel Paul and son have matters pretty much their own way in Tombstone, and you had better give in at the start. If you don't, I'll make you howl in the end. You hear me? Now, stand where you are or take the consequences."

He started to advance once more, but just as he did so a hand fell upon his collar, a knee was introduced in his back and he was laid down upon the floor in a way more forcible than pleasant.

"Thar, you durned skunk, lay thar an' let ther grass grow up 'tween yer toes!" said a sharp voice.

Nelse looked up and saw Tombstone Tom, but when he tried to rise he was whirled back and his head bumped twice on the bare boards.

"Keep whar I put ye, my gentle gazelle, or

"I'll play Hail Columby clean through with yer knowledge-box fur a drum-stick. Them as can't find no better biz than scarin' gals orter be made useful somehow."

"Let me up, curse you!" hissed Paul.

"Don't hurry ther chariot o' time, my blue-blood giraffe."

"How dare you lay a hand on me?"

"Don't require half ther courage it did ter cross ther Delawar' on ice or sign ther asseveration o' Independence. S'pose I'm goin' ter see ther female sex pussicated?"

"Meg Low ought to be proud of my notice."

"Mebbe, but ez long ez she ain't you'd better hide yer light under a bushel-basket an' sing sorter low."

Nelse uttered another oath and made a desperate effort to rise, but he was a child in the hands of Tombstone Tom. He was rolled over two or three times, until, at last, he was glad to be quiet, but he then made an attempt to fix the blame on Meg.

"I'm aware she's a lost an' undone individual," Tom replied, "an' I think some o' importin' an African missionarum ter labor with her, but that don't excuse you one oita. You're a durned mean reptyle ter be pesterin' a woman. Say, now, be you ready ter skip?"

"Yes," Paul suddenly answered.

"Git up, then."

The conquered brute slowly arose, but he looked from one to the other of his companions in a way which boded no good for their future.

"I'll make this the worst day of your lives!" he said, in a husky voice. "I am a gentleman's son, and I don't take slights nor blows from such low trash as you."

"You've blowed yer bugle," said Tom, cheerfully, "an' now I'll sound mine from outer ther depths. You jest git, ye 'tarnal serpent, an' don't let yer phiz spile any more, sweet milk 'round hyar. Ye hear me? Git!"

Nelse turned away, as though to leave the cabin, but he had taken but one step when he wheeled, revolver in hand, and presented the muzzle at Tombstone Tom's breast.

CHAPTER V.

SOMETHING MISSING.

MEG cried out with alarm, but she had yet to learn the coolness and decision of Tombstone Tom. Almost in the same breath that the revolver was presented his hand shot upward like a flash and, striking Paul's wrist, sent the weapon flying across the room.

And the next thing the "gentleman's son" knew he was lying on the ground outside, with a feeling that he had his against an earthquake and got the worst of it. Tom had flung him out as though he had been a child.

When he crawled to his feet his hated conqueror stood in the doorway, looking at him with a provoking smile.

"The best thing ye kin do now is ter shake ther dust off o' yer feet an' slide," was the good-natured advice. "Jess' ez like ez not you'll git hurt ef you fool 'round hyar."

"Give me my revolver," huskily said Nelson.

"Nixy. Cain't see ther p'int. I'll send it by mail, an' you kin pay ther postage; I won't glue up my tongue fur sech a riptyle ez you be. Do I perceive ye bendin' yer j'int?"

Nelson uttered a furious exclamation and then, without another word, slunk away in the darkness. Tombstone Tom stood motionless until Meg touched him on the shoulder.

"Oh, Tom!" she cried, "I'm afraid this 'll make trouble for you, and I wish you hadn't interfered."

"That's jest like you, Meg Low. You ain't no more idee o' the divine principles an' int'rest o' gratitude than a—"

"I have, too," cried the girl, quickly. "You won't give me credit for anything. I'm just as grateful as can be, but Nelse Paul will hate you for this and make trouble if he can. But I don't care if he does. Everybody hates me and is down on me, and I wish somebody would kill me!"

She dropped into a chair and burst into passionate tears which quickly upset Tom's coolness.

"Hold on thar!" he cried. "That ain't no ways fa'r, Meg; it ain't, by cricky! I can't overflow that way, an' you've got ther dead-wood on me. Jest let up now, an' start squar'. Give me a fair show!"

"I hate you!" she exclaimed.

"Glad on't, by mighty. Never s'posed ye was in love with me, an' I never hankered fur it, neither. But you ain't no call to sithe an' git up sech a freshet."

"You use me decent and I won't cry."

"Thunder! Be you a-weepin' an' wailin' 'bout me?"

She hesitated for a moment and then answered in the old, sullen way:

"No, I ain't."

"Glad on't, by gracious."

"I want you to go away."

"What fur?"

"I don't want to look at you."

"Wal, turn yer back this way an' it'll be all right. I don't want to be looked at. I'm no giraffe ter be quizzed an' criticised by ther multitude. 'Stead o' that, I j-st drapped 'round ter see ef Jack Low was hyar."

"Well, you've found out, ain't you?"

"Can't say I hev. Now, look here, Meg, gal, be sorter decent an' let me know what's up. You come ter spy on me at my palatial edifice. Why did ye do it?"

"Oh! you get mighty polite, now you want a favor!" said Meg, scornfully.

"Durned ef I want any, or'll take any. You kin go your way, Meg Low, an' I'll go mine; don't ye never speak ter me ag'in. I claim ter be a gentleman o' ther first water, with gold-bowed eye-glasses. Arter this, you an' me is out. You put that in your pipe an' chew it!"

And Tom strode out of the cabin in high indignation.

When Dan Wheelock returned to Jolly's hotel, he found that his father's body had been removed to an inner room and decently laid out on a board. The landlord was a kind-hearted man, but, as Tombstone Tom had told Dan, one who wasn't going to lose trade and friends in the town by coming noisily to the aid of a stranger. The youth questioned him some as to his opinion of the assassination, but Mr. Jolly was extremely cautious and made no statements which could afterward be used against him.

Sam Slasher, Ben Kipp and the rest of the gang had returned to the hotel and were profuse with offers of sympathy and aid—ignoring the episode at Pedro Castro's cabin—and as Tombstone Tom had cautioned Dan not to let them suspect anything, he forced himself to use them well.

He managed matters a good deal better than he had expected and was, really, showing a commendable courage.

At the same time he was unable to remain in the saloon, as they invited him, and see them drink, smoke, gamble and indulge in coarse jests, so he retired to the room where his father's remains had been left and sat down alone.

It was a little after nine o'clock when a tap at the window startled him, but not until it was repeated did he investigate. Then he saw a face pressed against the glass; not that of a rough, but, unless he was mistaken, a girl's.

She made a motion for him to raise the window and, obeying, he recognized Zoe Castro.

"I have something to say to you," she said, in a whisper, "but I dare not talk here. Will you come outside?"

Dan did not hesitate. He felt that the girl had been misused at the cabin, and that he ought to make the matter all right if possible, so he crawled out of the window without delay. She led the way to a quiet place fifty yards from the hotel.

"Since I saw you before I have heard something about your visit to Tombstone," she said, abruptly. "It may not be the truth, but if it is— Well, I heard that you and your father came to search for your uncle, who was mysteriously missing."

"That is a fact, miss."

"And that he was known to have got within half a mile of Tombstone, and then was never seen again."

"Right, again."

"When was this?"

"Some time the first week in August."

At her request Dan then told all he knew about the strange disappearance of Orlando Wheelock.

She nodded her head quickly.

"I half suspect I can tell you something about this matter," she said, eagerly.

"Heaven grant that you can. What do you know?"

"Well, you see I am among the mountains a good deal. We—we are very poor, and father can't use a pick and rocker any longer, and of course they won't give him any chance in the big mines. For three years I have supported both of us, and simply on what I could get in the mountains. Now and then I find a little gold-dust, you see. It has always been my am-

bition to find a mine—a place full of gold, I mean—and make poor old father rich!"

She paused for a moment and sighed, and Dan, who had never known what it was to be short of money, turned from his own troubles to give her silent sympathy, if nothing more. But she soon resumed.

"One day, when among the mountains, I became belated and caught in the dark. I was frightened, for there are terrible people around here, and I was hurrying home when, in a gulch, I came upon three men. They did not see me, for the sound of their voices gave me warning, and I hid in a niche in the cliff; but as they passed me I saw that they were walking in a line, and that the one in the middle seemed to be the prisoner of the other two."

"Go on!" said Dan, quickly.

"Just as they were opposite me I heard one utter a curse and order the prisoner to make haste, but he answered in a quick, sharp voice: 'You must think I am a fool to hurry, when I am probably going to be killed, but I give you fair warning, Colonel Paul, that there are those who will avenge me!'"

"Colonel Paul!" interrupted Dan. "Who's he?"

"One of the richest men in town—a mine-owner."

"A mine-owner?"

"Yes."

Unless Dan was greatly mistaken events were wheeling into line, but he asked Zoe to go on without further delay. She had little to tell, however; the rest of the talk between the trio had been inaudible to her and she had not recognized any of them; but when she heard Dan's story it had brought back a recollection of that mountain incident.

Dan asked her a good many more questions, but she had told all she knew, and more than she had ever told any one before. Well aware that Colonel Paul, with his money and influence, could crush her and her father if he tried, she had never ventured to lisp a word of what she had heard.

"But," she added, "I couldn't feel easy until I had told you."

"I cannot find words to thank you as you deserve," Dan replied, "but I can, at least, repay you by not mixing you up with the matter. In all human probability they were then taking uncle Orlando away to kill him, and it is too late to do him any good. I'm sorry you are so poor!"

The youth changed the subject so abruptly as to make Zoe start, but she smiled at her folly and at the remark and cheerfully answered:

"It can't be helped, sir."

"Why not?"

"I shall never find the bonanza I am hunting for."

"But I have plenty of money and would like to help you."

The girl's face flushed.

"Thank you, Mr. Wheelock, but we— we couldn't take money from a stranger."

"Haven't I a right to pay for the news you brought me?"

"No, for it was not brought for pay."

She spoke firmly, but pleasantly, and Dan, who was every moment becoming more interested in her, could not feel offended. And when he asked if he might be her friend she did not say "No," again.

As she was in haste to get back to her old father the interview was not prolonged any further, and as she was not willing he should see her home he at once returned to the hotel.

Wishing to regain it as secretly as he had left it, he first tried the window and then, finding it unfastened, shoved up the lower half and managed to crawl through.

The lamp had burned low while he was gone, and he at once hastened to raise the wick.

As he turned around he suddenly recoiled and an exclamation of surprise fell from his lips.

The body of Alfred Wheelock, which had been left lying on the board, was no longer to be seen!

CHAPTER VI.

WHERE WAS TOMBSTONE TOM?

FOR awhile Dan's surprise made him as motionless as a statue; but an easy explanation of the disappearance soon occurred to him, and he went out and asked Mr. Jolly why he had removed the body.

"Moved it?" echoed the landlord. "I hain't teched it, nur I ain't see'd it sence you shet yerself in alone with it. What d'ye mean? Ther diseased ain't took up his bed an' walked, hez he?"

"The remains have disappeared," said Dan, in an angry voice, "and you or some of these fellows have carried them away. For shame! I did not suppose we had body-snatchers here!"

"No more we ain't. We don't run no medical disputeary, an' don't need no subjects. This hyar is uncommon sing'lar o' ther kind!"

Mr. Jolly had walked into the inner room and was gazing at the bare board with strong dissatisfaction expressed on his face. He disapproved of the whole affair. Not only did he consider it poor taste for a dead man to play such a trick; but it was simply outrageous to confiscate the sheet he had kindly loaned for the occasion.

If he was not innocent he took a good deal of trouble to look so, and Sam Slasher and his charming followers had the same surprised cast of countenance; but Dan watched them closely and drew his own conclusion.

"See here," he suddenly said, "I won't trouble you to make any more conjectures in the case. Some of you are lying; some of you have stolen the body. Whoever it is, step forward and confess it!"

Young Wheelock faced the crowd with an ominous light in his eyes, and his voice rung out sharply. Sam Slasher saw that he was closely regarded, and took umbrage at once.

"Durn ye, ye little sawed-off duffer!" he cried; "what are ye lookin' at me fur? I hain't stole none o' yer durned ole corpses, an' I wouldn't ef ye had a cord on 'em all stocked up. You jest dry up, or I'll make ye!"

"I know who is guilty now," fearlessly answered the boy. "I charge Sam Slasher with having stolen the body!"

Mr. Slasher leaped into the air and cracked his heels in the old style.

"Howlin' hyenas! hear ther durned little sawed-off!" he shouted. "Ketch onter ther Eastern daisy that wants his comb cut behind his ears. He calls me a liar!—me, Sam Slasher, ther terrible tiger o' Tombstone. Boyee, give Jolly ther epigram ter put on yer grave-stun, for I'm about ter salivate ye; when I salivate no soothin' syrup can cure. Look out, fur I'm a-comun!"

The bully cracked his heels again and started for his intended victim, but Dan had begun to catch on to Tombstone ways and was ready for him.

He jerked his revolver from his pocket and presented it with surprising quickness.

"Stand back, or I'll put a bullet through you!" he cried, sharply. "You may run Tombstone, but you can't run me, nor you can't frighten me, you overgrown hulk of a man. I'll spoil your face for you if you come nearer."

Dan must be pardoned if he thought of Tombstone Tom and tried to imitate his free-and-easy way of speaking, but the fact that he thus thought of him made him strongly wish the brave young fellow was there.

Having stirred up a hornet's nest, he needed help to manage the hornets.

Where was Tombstone Tom?

Sam Slasher had paused at sight of the revolver. Great fighting man that he was, he always did pause when he saw a leveled shooting-iron with plenty of grit behind it. He had known men who disregarded those trifles, and the sands of Arizona had long rested above their perforated bodies.

But Sam thought it safe and practicable to frighten the youth, and he tried it, beginning with a whoop which almost shook the walls of the hotel.

"See him, boyees!" he roared. "See ther durned sawed-off that dares ter look at me. See him shake an' shiver. Youngster, drop that weapon—drop it, I say; DROP IT!"

The last words were poured forth with all the volume of the brute's capacious lungs and it must be confessed Dan felt any thing but at his ease, but he would not retreat from his position.

"I shall not drop it," he steadily answered, "and I caution you not to tempt it. I shall certainly fire if you advance. Landlord Jolly, do you allow such things in your hotel?"

"My dear young man," said the temporizing landlord, "I beg that you will remain calm. Let there be no bloodshed in my house; there has been too much of it already. But you are hasty, young sir—hot-blooded and hasty. I assure you, Mr. Samer—Slasher, I mean—did not leave the bar-room all the while your door was closed. Some outsider has stolen the remains of your lamented parent; a thing which would not have happened had you not rashly gone out to walk—"

"Oh, gammon!" interrupted Sam. "Be you wound up? Now, hear me, my bully boys! I say this sassy young cuss has got away with

ther corpus hisself; how, I don't know; but it is gone, an' ez he has cast aspirations on my fair fame he hez got ter answer fur them. You bet!"

Dan had rashly lowered his revolver, and at the last word Sam bounded at him with a roar like that of a mad bull, intending to so alarm him that he would be taken off his guard, and secured before he could do any harm.

But just then was an interpolation of a scene not expected by any of them; a human being came flying over the heads of those in the crowd and, as a pair of feet were planted in his back, Mr. Slasher became scattered around the room in a mixed-up way.

But he who had knocked him over came down on his feet lightly, and, wheeling, showed the round, good natured face of Tombstone Tom.

"Here we are!" he cheerfully announced. "Jest through from Texas, all ther way by rail an' ther rest o' ther trip in a balloon. Ther only saf't an' reliable line."

Sam Slasher was by this time trying to gain his knees, and looking for his hat and revolver, each of which had gone on a prospecting expedition on its own hook, and he looked up at the boy with a mad look on his face.

"Tombstone Tom!" he hissed.

"Right you are, old boss. Tombstone Tom, ther gymnast from Ghoul Gymnasium. Mebbe you see'd my unrivaled act, Samivel?"

The fellow gained his feet, uttered a curse, and started for his revolver, which he had perceived in one corner.

"Hold on, Sammy, let it be!" ordered Tom.

Sam hesitated, growled a curse, and started again.

"Fur ther last time, hold on!"

Tombstone Tom spoke in a way which all knew was not to be disregarded, and Slasher pulled up where he was. Strange as it may seem, Tom ranked as a man in the town, and had done so ever since he had shown his "sand" when the Apaches made a descent on them a year before, on which occasion the boy won his *sobriquet*.

All had acknowledged he was a typical Tombstone fighter.

The boy said "Hold on!" and Sam Slasher stopped. His wishful gaze wandered from his own revolver to that of Tom, and he saw fit to take water.

"You're mighty hard on a feller, Tom," he observed, sulkily. "Is an Eastern galoot gwine ter come hyar an' knock us men 'round ez though we was nine-pins?"

"Ef you raise a row he is, an' ef he can't do it alone, I stand ready ter back him," was the cool reply.

"This shall be answered fur, sometime."

"No time like present, Samivel. Jest step outside an' we'll each hold a candle an' shoot by ther flicker."

"Not by a durned sight. I don't fight that way. But you'll hear from me ag'in," and the fellow slunk away.

"Write by ther next mail, Sammy: I'll be eternally glad ter hear from you. Now, then, Dan, what is all this yarn I hear about ther dead man amblin' away on ther sly?"

Dan again explained, withholding only the fact that he had gone away to talk with Zoe Castro.

"Wal, I reckon you'n me kin settle ther matter. Gents, we will excuse you."

The crowd went out as peacefully as kittens, and then Dan hastened to impart the information he had received from Zoe.

"Ther case takes on a new complexion, a teetotally new style o' blush, ez I may say," observed Tom, coolly. "Ther day begins ter dawn in ther eastern horizon. So sbe beerd ther captyve man accuse one o' his captors o' being Colonel Paul? Good! Thar we hev ther identity o' ther galoot who sold out ther share o' ther mine ter O. Wheelock, Esquire, an' arterwards prevented him from claimin' his property. Jest like the old colonel, I swar!"

"Do you really suppose he is the man?"

"Ain't a doubt on't; the colored gent is visible in ther wood-pile, as 'twere."

"What are we to do?"

"Wal, considerin' ez how ther diseased hez disappeared, it is my solemn opinion ther colonel hez stole him, too, an' ef we go thar we may be able ter git light on ther subject."

"Go to Paul's?"

"That was ther drift o' my insinuations."

"But won't that betray us completely?"

"Not ef nobody don't see us."

Dan began to see the point and announced that he was ready; so they left the room by the window and started at once. The night was dark and promised to be favorable to their enter-

prise, though how things would work at Paul's house was by no means certain. Tombstone Tom confessed that he intended to be guided wholly by circumstances, and Dan had little hope of success.

When the colonel's house was reached they found all silent, but a light was visible in two rooms, one of which Tom stated was Paul's.

Their hopes of seeing a stir which would indicate that a body was being disposed of inside were doomed to disappointment, but Tom, with his usual resolution, was not inclined to abandon the expedition until he had made one effort at least.

If they could gain a view of the colonel's room it might settle one point, and he resolved to do it. True, the room was on the second floor and no ladder was at hand with which to ascend, but a straight piece of timber, of the joist variety, was found, and the Arizona boy laid hold of it and began to climb.

CHAPTER VII.

COLONEL PAUL PLOTS FOR SAFETY.

It was no difficult task for Tombstone Tom to go up the joist, and he was then on a level with the window. Once there he found, much to his gratification, that the lower sash was raised; only the curtain intervened between him and a sight of the interior of the room.

But it did not suffice to shut in the sound of voices.

Two persons were speaking, and as he listened each word came to him plainly.

"You are to use your own discretion, of course, but from my description you cannot mistake the man. I would suggest that you move as soon as possible, for he may leave the More Light Hotel."

It was the voice of Colonel Paul, and Tom could not but believe he was speaking of Dan.

"Suppose I get inter trouble—do ye stand ready ter keep me out?" asked a rough voice.

"Why, of course I do; I'll see an *alibi* established for you. But why are you so particular? It isn't your usual way."

"Wal, I am gettin' sorter cautious sence Arsenic Abe an' Dead-shot Dick was taken in out o' ther wet. I don't want my turn ter come, ye see."

"Nonsense! You seem to be losing sand. I never thought such a man as you would turn pale in Tombstone."

"That'll do, cunnel; no insinuations on my sand, ef you please. Jes' watch me, ef ye think I'm weakenin'. You shall see that I'll wipe this Wheelock out in the shake o' a deer's caudal appendix."

Tombstone Tom was too cool to start, but he shut one eye and seemed taking aim at the invisible men.

"I hope he's the last of the Wheelock family," growled Paul, as he kicked viciously at a chair.

"Ef he is, ther race dies out pooty thunderin' quick."

The young spy had a strong desire to see the last speaker, for it seemed clear that the colonel had hired him to kill Dan—although the reader will correctly suspect it was Albert Hardy, alias John G. Wheelock, who was menaced. Neither Paul nor his man had yet heard of the events at the More Light Hotel.

Tombstone Tom tried to push the curtain aside, but it was held firmly at the bottom by some new contrivance, and was of a stiff material which could not be handled at the sides without a tell-tale crumpling like that of starched goods.

But as the spy deemed it very essential he should know who was going to try and kill Dan, he resolved to cut a slit in the curtain and see him.

This was not difficult with his keen knife, and as he looked through, his lips formed two words:

"Planet Pete!"

The second man was a Tombstone tough, though not one of the crowd that followed Sam Slasher. Planet Pete preferred to play a lone hand, and he was notorious for holding trumps.

"I shall pay you well for this job, Pete," the colonel was saying. "I will not deny the fact that this fellow is very much in my way. Plant him and you shall have three times what I ever paid you for a job before."

"You kin depend on me, cunnel; consider Mister Wheelock outer ther way. Ef I can't plan it, my name ain't Planet Pete."

And the fellow chuckled over his joke as grimly as though ten thousand men had not used it before.

Just then, however, Tombstone Tom's atten-

tion became centered on something which was occurring below him.

"Hello! what's goin' on hyar?"

The inquiry, roughly put, made the spy look down, and he saw a man standing beside Dan. Matters had taken a rather startling turn.

"Nothing," answered Dan, in a way which showed he was rather confused at the undesirable meeting.

"Nothin', is it? So burglary an' sech is nothin'? Wal, *perhaps!* Turn 'round hyar an' let me see yer figger-head."

Dan was wheeled about, and then the voice added:

"Ther youngster, by death!"

Tombstone Tom was becoming excited. He wondered why Dan did not hit the fellow before being recognized—he would have done so—but the fact was Dan had lost his presence of mind for a time.

His ally, however, knew that delay was dangerous, and turning around, he leaped boldly from his perch, with the meddling individual for his objective point.

Down he came, and his calculation was so true that he alighted directly on the man's shoulders and knocked him to the ground; but with the agility before noted the boy kept his own balance, and rebounding, alighted on his feet, at the same time speaking one word:

"Run!"

It was enough, and away went the two pards, never stopping to see whether the fallen man arose again or not. They did not pause until safe from pursuit.

"I reckon that is done," said Tom coolly.

"You came just in time; I had lost my 'sand,' as you call it," said Dan, breathing heavily.

"You must l'arn never ter lose it, ef you want'er git along salubriously in Arizony. Say, do ye know who that critter was?"

"No."

"'Twas Jack Low, ther int'resting dad o' our Meg. Durn ther old sneak, I'm right sorry he happened around our way; I be that. Seems like he is in cahoots with Paul, jest as I s'pected all along; an' it was Paul's doin's that Meg was sent ter spy on us."

Here Tom made a mistake, for there was no love between the colonel and the Lows.

"But did the man inside say anything about the—about father's body?"

"Not a word, though mebbe they would if ther interview hadn't been broke up. But I heerd suthin' else o' int'rest; Paul wants ter plant you, an' he's hired a rooster named Planet Pete ter do ther job."

Dan could not avoid a start, but he forced himself to be outwardly calm and answered:

"Well, forewarned is forearmed."

"Yas, an' ther bare hook don't ketch no fish. See hyar, pard, you mustn't sleep at ther More Light, ter-night, or you're likely ter lose what light ye hev. You'n' me will bunk in ther ken-yon over yon fur a few hours an', in ther mornin', we'll turn up like ther jack o' trumps. You jest leave this hull matter ter me an' I'll show ye a magic lantern spectacism. Come on!"

And they went.

When Colonel Paul and Planet Pete finished their interview the latter came out and was going away when he tripped and nearly fell over some obstruction which should not have been there. He turned and looked closely and thus discovered a man, while a second glance showed him the joist standing by the wall and reaching to the window.

His signal soon brought Paul out, and they above the insensible man.

"Jack Low!" said the colonel, with a frown.

"Ther identicle half-an'-half."

"He had been spying upon us, but he got a fall which knocked his senses out for a time. You and I will see to it he don't recover them. In all human probability he is an ally of John Wheelock—the latter said Low was one of his witnesses—and as he has played the listener he has, of course, heard us plan to put Wheelock out of the way. The result is, Jack Low must die!"

"Good! Let me at him!"

Pete jerked out his knife, but Paul caught his arm.

"Not here, not here! Wheelock is sharp enough to look into such things as blood-stains. We will carry him over to the mouth of the canyon, knife and bury him, and no one will be the wiser. This is really a great run of luck for us."

Pete did not object, and they only paused to get a spade and then lifted the half-breed's in-

sensible form and started. He was a pretty solid weight, but they had abundant muscle and did not heed such a trifle.

When the proper place was reached Paul directed his ally where to dig and operations were at once begun. The ground would have delighted a professional, for there was so much sand about it that the spade went down easily at each motion.

Planet Pete soon stood in a trench waist-deep while the colonel, standing above, divided his attention between the work and the man they proposed to bury.

"That'll do," he said, at last. "Come up, and we'll soon finish the work."

The digger endeavored to do so, but the sand proved a most treacherous hold and caved in whenever he touched it.

"Give me your hand an' boost," he directed.

The colonel stooped to obey, but just as he did so something struck him in the rear with tremendous force and he turned a somerset, coming down on Pete's head and knocking him over like a ten-pin. Both fell to the bottom of the hole, and then all light disappeared and their eyes and mouths were filled with sand. The banks of the grave had caved in and buried them alive.

Had they taken due time for meditation this would not have alarmed them, for the hole was but three feet deep, anyhow, but they yielded to their first impulse and began flinging the sand frantically about with their hands in a wild attempt to get out.

But the more they worked the more the shower of earth increased—a singular fact, which they would have better understood had they been able to look through it.

Here was Jack Low, shoveling it in with all possible vigor. While they unwisely delayed the knife on him he had recovered his senses and was doing his best to make matters warm for them. Had he consulted his inclination he would have brained both of them with the spade, but he hoped to get a good deal of money out of Colonel Paul some day, and now he could do no more than to frighten them.

He did this thoroughly, for when they finally succeeded in fighting their way to the surface they were so out of breath and strength that they dropped panting to the ground.

Of Jack Low there was no sign.

It was several minutes before their courage and muscle returned to them, but when it did they retraced their steps to the village, making no attempt to find the wily half-breed. They had been fairly outwitted, and now they must prepare for a desperate battle.

CHAPTER VIII.

A TOUGH CASE FROM HARD LUCK.

DAN WHELOCK and Tombstone Tom were at the More Light Hotel at an early hour the following morning, but they might as well have stayed away so far as getting any tidings of the mystery of the disappearance of the body of the former's father was concerned.

If any one knew where it was he did not raise his voice to make the news public.

Tom was inclined to think Colonel Paul knew nothing about the matter, so they could only decide that some one in the hotel did, and their suspicions turned strongly against Sam Slasher. In fact, Tom was of the opinion he had not only stolen the body but that he was the man who had deprived it of life, acting under orders from Paul.

Dan found the mystery too great for him to handle and blessed the luck which had sent Tombstone Tom as an ally. That astute young man took hold of it with quiet confidence, though he acknowledged it was a serious drawback that the town was such a rough-and-ready place.

Quarrels there were settled, as a rule, among the principals, and as Paul and Slasher, combined, wielded a good deal of influence, they would be a heavy team to buck against.

Jolly, who still seemed inclined to do the right thing, allowed both the pards to examine his house at their will, but there wasn't the slightest trace of a lifeless body of any kind, much less that of Alfred Wheelock.

During this search, Slasher, Kipp & Co. kept apart, having a due regard for Tombstone Tom's ability as a fighting man, but their surly looks showed that they were only waiting for the proper chance to start in and raise trouble.

That same morning Zoe Castro had an encounter which had a bearing on future events. She had cooked breakfast for her father and herself and made the old man comfortable, and was just preparing to go out prospecting, when a shadow fell across the threshold and she

looked up to see a man who was a stranger to her.

The reader has met him before, however; it was Mr. Albert Hardy, alias John G. Wheelock.

"Good-morning," he said, politely, "I trust we are all well here."

Zoe did not answer, but her father was as noted for politeness as for meekness, and he assured the rather dashing looking visitor that he was in his usual health. As he did so Hardy helped himself to a chair and seemed inclined to be at home.

Zoe was all ready to depart, but there was something so snakelike in the looks of the caller that she resolved to delay until he was gone, not caring to leave her father alone with him.

But Hardy had come with a fixed purpose, and he worked around to it after a little delay.

"I have come to see if you will take a boarder. Senor Castro," he said. "I have just arrived in town and, being a stranger, want some quiet and respectable place to reside for a while."

Castro was too much surprised to answer, but Zoe, who liked neither the man nor proposal, was as ready as he was backward.

"We don't take boarders, sir," she replied, "but you can get quarters at Jolly's hotel—the More Light."

"Excuse me, but the hotel won't do. I am a man of quiet tastes, and so much noise and drunkenness as a hotel has drives me almost out of my wits. That's why I want to board in a private family."

"Well, there is Saul Slocum's, and Pewter Pat's, and—"

"And so forth," said Hardy, with what he meant for a winning smile. "None of them will do, Miss Castro. I have seen them already, and I can see that this place would suit me exactly. Senor, if you will take me I will pay you your own price."

Castro's face flushed slightly. He was not really avaricious, but his long struggle with poverty had shown him the value of money. He spoke quickly, without stopping to remember that they not only had no suitable place for the stranger to sleep, but that dishes from which to eat were few and far between with them.

"Certainly, we will take you, sir," he said.

"It is settled then," said Hardy, smiling.

"I beg your pardon, but it is not settled," said Zoe, quickly. "My father has spoken hastily, forgetting our lack of accommodations. You can see for yourself, sir, that this small cabin is not fitted for the taking of lodgers."

"But I will see that you have a larger house."

"If you are to buy one, you can easily get a woman to take care of it. We cannot take you!"

Zoe spoke firmly, for the man's persistence convinced her that he had some object not apparent on the surface, and she began to be afraid of him. Such a man was not wanted.

Hardy endeavored to shake her resolution, but as soon as her father saw that she did not approve of it he abruptly changed his own verdict—he always agreed with his daughter—and in the end the visitor had to take a negative answer.

He showed traces of chagrin and anger, but he was a man who believed in controlling his temper, and he managed to utter his regrets in a graceful way as he prepared to go. But when clear of the cabin his lip curled and a dangerous light shone in his dark eyes.

"The game has failed, but I'm going to conquer the little beauty, somehow. She is a treasure, and I won't rest until I have won her, by fair means or foul. The longer she resists, the more complete will be my triumph. And now for the other venture!"

So saying, he started for the More Light Hotel.

Dan Wheelock and Tombstone Tom were sitting outside the hotel door when a remarkable-looking horse and worse looking rider appeared in the distance and, advancing, paused before the public house.

The horse was a shadow; from his looks one would say he was no more than a dried hide kept in a degree of shape by bracing from within; but the "bracing" came from bones, of which Nature had surely given him his share, and, as Tom observed, after a critical survey, "thar was life in ther critter."

The rider was equally dilapidated, though not so thin in point of flesh. His clothes were in ruin, and the rags he could not help had been augmented by others which he seemed to wear

as ornaments, shapeless strips of cloth of all colors being tied on wherever there was a chance, until he looked like a half-plucked fowl.

From under his ragged hat strayed long, coarse hair which would have seemed more in place as a tail for his horse, while his smooth-shaven face was painted red, white and blue in a fantastic style which would have driven a paint-using Indian wild with envy.

This singular pair halted before the door and the rider opened a mouth of generous size which was guiltless of teeth.

"Hyar, boyee, kim an' take my steed," he said, looking at Tombstone Tom.

"I ain't used ter handlin' defunct 'natomy," the boy answered, "an' ef you've robbed a hoss graveyard you'll hev ter polish ther bones all alone. Don't ketch me doin' it!"

"What be you hired fur, you young scalamag?"

"Hired fur my beauty, an' we want another jest like me with a few variations. Be you fur sale or ter let?"

His innocent remarks seemed to offend the old fellow, who made a rush for him, but Tom coolly threw a handspike and shot over his head, while the ragged man nearly collided with Jolly, who had come out and was standing in utter surprise.

"Great Pompey!" he ejaculated, "what hez rained down now?"

"Be you ther host o' this ranch?" asked the new-comer.

"I s'pect I am," Jolly acknowledged.

"Wal, I want comodations fur man an' beast, with all modern improvements, sech ez hot an' cold water, soap, bed-bugs an' a leak through ther ruff. Git things up in A1, bang-up style, an' ther s'quivalent is yourn. I'm Howlin' Hank, ther Hyena, last from Hard Luck, an' I kin pay for what I eat. I'm lined with gold; kerry it 'round in coins, bullion an' paper. I'm a millionaire. When I take sick and git bled, I bleed gold; when I sneeze, solid nuggets fly through the air; scrape my skin an' it comes off in scales an inch thick; make me weep an' ev'ry tear is an eagle; my bones are solid, eighteen-carat bullion. Oh! I'm a man o' gold, from my toes up, an' I make 'em rich ez looks at me. D'ye feel ther power on't?"

The Hyena swung his arms wildly during this speech, and several other men had walked out to hear him, but Mr. Jolly had seen high-talking bummers before then, and he was not perceptibly moved.

"No," he answered, "I ain't felt ther power on't yet, but I'm open ter indocuments. Just weep a few heart-rendin' sobs an' then put an eagle in my hand."

"Later, later, mine host. I do biz on ther European plan, an' never pay fur what I don't git. Ter-morrer, mine host—"

"No time like ther present, an' no man puts up at my hotel till I see ther color o' his cash, an' make sure I ain't got ter be out while keepin' an inn."

The painted man shook his fist angrily.

"D'ye mean ter insinuate I can't pav?" he demanded.

"Nary insinuate. All I keer fur is ther cash."

"I've killed men fur less than this, you undersized Root-Digger Injun, you! Mebbe you didn't hear me announce my incognomen. I'm Howlin' Hank, ther Hyena from Hard Luck, an' when I howl I allays create an' arthquake. I'm ther malignantest case o' morbid metaphysics in ther known world. Look out I don't tread on ye an' crush you out flat. Money? Mebbe I ain't got none on it! Mebbe you don't keep p'izon fur whisky. Money? Look at it!"

And the Hyena developed a handful of gold from his rags which was certainly enough to keep him at the More Light for a month; and it was enough to win Mr. Jolly's heart, for that excellent man didn't care whether he put up a prince or a peasant so long as he paid his bills.

So an employe took the bony horse away, and Jolly and Howling Hank went into the bar-room, followed by the rest of the crowd, some of whom began to think there was a chance for fun in the near future.

One of this number was Sam Slasher, and when the Hyena from Hard Luck called for a glass of whisky, and was just raising it to his mouth, Sam caught it from his hand and poured it down his own capacious throat instead.

CHAPTER IX.

THE GRAVE IN THE SAND.

HOWLING HANK seemed to be dumfounded for a moment by the loss of the beverage he had rashly paid for in advance, and he gazed from the empty glass to Sam's grinning face in utter silence.

"Good whisky that!" observed Mr. Slasher.

The Hyena's mouth unclosed.

"Allow me ter inquire who paid fur it?" he gently said.

"I opine you did."

"Exactly. Likewise, mebbe you hearn me observe I do biz on ther European plan an' only pay fur what I git?"

"I opine I did."

"Exactly. Wal, I must request you ter return that thar whisky or buy more."

"Can't do that, old man, but we'll make a compromise. You may set 'em up fur ther house, ez you orter 'a' did in ther fust place. We don't allow no exclusive drinkin' at this bar; drink one, drink all, is our motter."

The Hyena slowly counted the crowd, wobbling his finger at each man.

"Seventeen," he observed. "Set 'em up, mine host, an' I'll pass it round. Keep yer places er you don't git no drink."

The latter direction was to the roughs, and as they were willing to do almost anything to get their liquor without cost, they decided to obey and re-open on the Hyena afterward. And so the landlord poured out the fire-water and Hank passed it around as agreed upon.

"Now, then, you durned critters, pour her down, an may ye enjoy it. It's ther epizootic epigram from Hard Luck who's treatin'."

Dan, who had stood at one side with Tombstone Tom, quietly nudged his companion.

"Did you notice the old fellow put something in Sam Slasher's glass?" he asked.

"Yes," answered Tom, "and I s'pect this hyar treat hez got claws. Wait an' see!"

They hadn't long to wait. Slasher became uneasy, spat out a big chew of tobacco he had just taken, got up, walked across the floor and finally sat down again.

"I say, Jolly, what sort o' cussed fire-water was that?" he surlily asked.

"Best Old Rye," said Jolly, polishing the barrel.

"Best ole lightnin'! Cuss ther stuff! It is rakin' my supper-box all ter pieces, an' I'm sicker 'n a hen with ther gaps. Oh! thunder an'—"

The rest of Mr. Slasher's remarks was lost as his rebellious stomach threw up all there was in it. Samuel vomited laboriously for some reason, and if he could have got a word in edgewise he would have expressed the opinion that he was dying. Ben Kipp thumped him sympathetically on his back, and speech finally returned.

"I'm p'izoned!" he gasped.

"Small-pox!" observed the Hyena, who had taken a seat near at hand and looked benevolently at his ease.

"Yarler fever!" added Kipp.

"How d'ye like my way o' treatin', Samuel?" continued the man from Hard Luck.

Slasher glared at him furiously.

"You've p'izoned me!" he snarled.

"No, you'll be all right in five minutes. All I did was ter put an emetic in yer last glass. Ye see, I live on ther European plan, payin' fur what I git, an' when I seed you git ther whisky I had paid fur I swore you shouldn't fat on it. He! he!"

The laugh brought Slasher to his feet at once, and he felt very much ashamed for showing the white feather.

"My revolvers!" he shouted. "Ben Kipp, give me ther weapons an' I'll shoot this varmint full o' holes—"

"I wouldn't ef I was you!"

Howling Hank spoke with a quiet drawl; but Sam suddenly became aware that the fellow had leveled a pair of revolvers at him, and they had such a business look that he paused in the midst of his wrath with a jerk, as it were.

"Sinner, stop, while you kin, or I shall surely take ye in," said the ragged man, dropping into rhyme. "Don't fool round hyar, fur I'm Howlin' Hank, ther hydrodynamical Hyena from Hard Luck, an' when I howl ther 'arth shakes. Let me puff at ye on't, an' I'll leave ye as bald ez an infant. I'm a hull bad man ter rile, fur I'm old an' oily, hard ter hold, an' wuss ter let go on. Think it over afore ye bite!"

Sam concluded to think it over, for due meditation convinced him he would quicker outlive his mishap, and get rid of the gibes of his companions, by striking up a friendship with the bundle of rags from Hard Luck than by trying to wipe him out. So he begged Hank's pardon, and was duly voted a good fellow and an ornament to Tombstone society.

The matter was just settled when a hand was laid on Dan Wheelock's shoulder, and he wheeled suddenly. There appeared to be no cause for alarm, however; a well-dressed man stood before him, politely smiling.

"Can I have a word in private with you—that is, with no listener except your friend. I count him in."

"Right, boss," said Tom. "I'm one o' ther white hen's chickens, an' ef thar's dough around I wanter wet my bill."

And the two boys followed the man from the saloon. Tombstone Tom knew him to be a stranger in the place; but we have met the man before. It was Albert Hardy.

"You will excuse me for using so much privacy," said he, "but as I don't belong in town I don't like to chip in too freely; but I've heard your story and think perhaps I can throw a little light on the subject. You have not found your father's body?"

"No, sir."

"Nor don't know where it went?"

"So far, there is no clew."

"Well, I believe I can give you one."

"Where is it?"

"Well, you see I was coming into town at a late hour last night, when I chanced upon two men who were digging in the ground. My first idea was that they were gold-diggers, but even with my limited knowledge of such matters I soon saw it was absurd to suppose they would work in utter darkness. So I looked closer and saw they were lowering something into an excavation in the ground; something that looked like a man. Then it struck me somebody had died of small-pox and they were putting him out of the way thus, and I took to my heels—yes, I confess, I did some tall walking!"

And Mr. Hardy seemed as amused as though he was really telling the truth.

"Where did this take place?" Dan quickly asked.

"Up there, near the mouth of that canyon."

"Grin-an'-bear-it Gulch," said Tombstone Tom, at once. "Look-a-hyar, my frien', do you s'pose ye kin find ther museum ag'in?"

"The what?" asked Hardy.

"The museum—place o' saltpeter—grave."

"Oh! you mean manseolium—sepulcher. Yes, I am quite sure I can."

"Then p'int yer nose that way an' flap yer heels right sprightly. That corpus is a hard thing ter stay put an' we wanter settle down onter it 'fore it ups an' goes ag'in."

"Have you any idea who stole it?"

"Think it is intended fur a medical discussion-room in New York, but things ain't what they seem."

Hardy smiled secretly and led the way toward Grin-and-bear-it Gulch, and the boys followed without a suspicion that they were going into trouble. They did not know that Hardy, like Dan, was interested in Orlando Wheelock, or, at least, in his share of the Yellow Jack mine.

It wasn't a very long walk and the trio soon reached the place where Colonel Paul and Planet Pete had tried to bury Jack Low the previous night, and so narrowly missed being buried themselves.

"Here is the place," said Hardy. "You can see the sand has been recently disturbed and—"

"But ther durned old grave is empty!" said Tom.

"It does look like it," said Hardy, in surprise. "How do you account for this? Surely—"

"He's taken up his bed an' walked."

"Who?"

"Ther corpus."

"See here, Tom," interrupted Dan, "I wish you wouldn't speak so disrespectfully."

"I'll try ter put on a solemncholly style. Say, Mister Man, be you sure anything was put in thar?"

"I only know what I told you."

"Did they see you?"

"I'm not sure; perhaps they did."

"That's it," said Tom, in disgust. "You run so fast you flung sand inter ther air all over them, an' they dropped onter ther racket an' moved ther plant. We are beat ag'in, sure ez sin. Ther jig is up an' ther jigger is gone."

It did seem so, but Mr. Hardy proved to have sharp eyes, and he discovered the trail of two men which led away up the gulch, and from the inequality of the steps he argued that they must have been bearing a burden; and from this it was easy to draw the deduction that the body had been carried further away for interment.

Neither of the boys suspected the "body" had been lively enough to fill up the grave after it was dug.

Hardy followed the trail without any hesitation, and they entered the mouth of the canyon. It was a rather bleak-looking place, with a multitude of boulders scattered about, and high

walls of rock which shut out the usual light of day; but the party was not one to heed such unsubstantial terrors as darkness or gloomy scenery.

Worse was in store for them, however.

All at once a wild whoop broke upon the air, and every boulder seemed to give forth a man. Wild, half-naked, bronzed fellows—Apaches, seemingly—swarmed all around them, and before Tom and Dan could get their wits clear, they were being knocked about like two foot-balls.

The struggle was soon over, and then the boys were held in the Indians' hands, while Hardy lay flat on the ground, still and, it seemed, dead, though Tom looked at him in a way which would imply a doubt of the fact.

But they were not allowed to investigate; their captors bound them quickly and they were hurried away up the canyon.

Dan felt like giving up hope, but looking at his ally, he saw that his sharp, shrewd face gave no sign of alarm or dismay, and he resolved to make the best of the situation and trust to luck to get out of it.

Bad as it seemed, the tide might yet turn in their favor.

CHAPTER X.

A QUEER TRIO ON THE TRAIL.

MEG LOW was alone in her father's cabin that evening. Jack had eaten his supper as usual and then, as usual, had gone out to spend the evening elsewhere. The girl never asked and never knew where he went or what he did; she did not want to know.

With her knowledge of the man she was sure he was never engaged in any creditable business.

A sad, bitter life was that she led. Jack Low was despised by all decent people for his moral deformities, and by his chosen associates for the Indian blood in his veins; but while he did not care a penny for any of these things, Meg had to share the family curse and, to her, it was a most bitter lot. At times she had tried to rise above it, but it is a singular fact that our philanthropic world too often refuses to let people rise from the depths.

This evening Meg was sitting flat on the floor, her chin resting on her hands, when there was a light footfall at the door and she looked up and saw Zoe Castro.

The latter had paused at the threshold, and there she stood during an embarrassing silence which followed.

Meg did not stir from the floor, and her great, black eyes became fixed on Zoe's face with a cold, repellent stare, while Zoe tried in vain to speak, to subdue her confusion and embarrassment. The girls had never been friends, for the latter had rashly accepted the prevailing opinion of Meg, and Jack's daughter had paid her back with all the hatred of her fierce nature.

"I—I have come to see you," finally faltered Zoe.

"Well, ain't you a-looking at me?" retorted Meg.

"Yes, but I have something to say—"

"Well, why don't ye say it then, instead of standing there like a post?"

Zoe felt like retreating, for her companion, still sitting on the floor, her chin on her hands and her black hair flowing all around her, was not an inviting picture to a timid person, however much her beauty might affect bolder natures.

But Castro's daughter had come with a fixed purpose and she would not give it up.

"I don't know why you should speak so harshly, Meg. I am sure I never did you any harm."

"What good have you done me?"

"We were never well acquainted."

Meg laughed harshly.

"You were careful that we didn't become so."

Zoe sighed, the more so that she felt the reproach to be well founded, but she would not be driven away by even such resentment as she showed.

"Well, we won't speak of ourselves, Meg, but I am here to ask a favor of you and—"

"You'd better go away!"

"I hope you will grant it," Zoe went on, steadily. "I have reason to believe a friend of mine has fallen into the hands of the Apaches, and I want you to use your influence with your father to have him found and released. Wait! hear me through. Jack Low is half Apache, and if he hasn't influence with them he must at least be able to follow a trail. Now, not as a favor to me, but in the name of humanity—to save this prisoner—will you not use your influence with your father?"

Meg heard without moving a finger.

"No!" she answered.

"Think again."

"Bah! What is the use? All here have scorned and reviled me. Why should I do them a favor?"

"But this young man has not been in Tombstone two days. He cannot have scorned you."

"They are all alike."

"And you refuse?"

"Yes," coldly answered Meg.

Zoe wrung her hands sorrowfully.

"Then the young stranger and Tombstone Tom will be killed by those terrible men."

Meg Low sprang up at a single bound.

"Who did you say?"

"His name is Daniel Wheelock," said Zoe, wondering what new freak had attacked the girl.

"No, no; the other one."

"Tombstone Tom?"

"What of him? Do you say he is a prisoner?"

"Yes; he was taken with Mr. Wheelock, but—"

"When was it, and how?"

Meg spoke sharply and imperiously, but though Zoe was a good deal surprised, she managed to tell her story clearly.

When returning from one of her prospecting trips that day, she had chanced to see several Apaches hiding among the rocks as though in ambush. Frightened, she had hurried away, but before she had gone a great distance there had been a sound of fighting, as though some prey had come to their net. Still she did not pause, for she knew lawlessness was common around Tombstone, and feared to share the same fate, but made her way at once to the village.

It was not until dark, however, that she learned that the two boys were supposed to be prisoners. They had been seen going toward Grin-and-bear-it Gulch in company with a strange man, and then they were fallen upon by Apaches and taken away as prisoners.

Such was the tale told by a miner, but though it was commonly commented upon as a very bold proceeding on the part of the Indians, no one seemed inclined to interfere.

"I have heard it said," added Zoe, "that one skilled trailer is as good in such a case as twenty, and I wish you would ask your father to save him."

"He shall be saved!" said Meg, quickly, her face showing that she was thinking deeply.

"He seems like—like a very nice young man," added Zoe, hesitatingly, "and I would like to do him a favor."

Meg turned upon her with the old, fierce flash in her eye.

"What is he to you?" she sharply asked.

"He is my friend."

Meg stamped her foot.

"Speak plainly! Is he your lover?"

Zoe's face flushed deeply, and her wild companion caught her arm in a painful hold.

"Listen to me," she said, imperiously, "I, too, love him, and I will tolerate no rival. If I save him he shall be mine, all mine. Swear that you will withdraw your claim, or by my life, he shall perish at the hands of the Apaches!"

Zoe shrunk away, startled by such jaguar-like fierceness, but though she really had taken a deep interest in the young man, and felt as jealous as her gentle nature would allow, she was not disposed to ruin her chances by asserting the fact.

"What a ridiculous idea!" she exclaimed.

"Why, I have never seen him but once; he has been in Tombstone only two days, you know."

Meg's face suddenly cleared.

"Who are you talking about?" she demanded.

"Why, Daniel Wheelock, of course."

Meg burst into a laugh.

"Well, I reckon we won't quarrel then; I don't care a picayune for him. I thought you meant— Yes, I'll help you."

"Meg, you thought I was talking about Tombstone Tom; it is him you love."

The dark faced girl looked at her a moment in doubt and irresolution, and then abruptly answered:

"Yes, I do, but don't you ever tell it; don't you let Tom know it. He hates me and says I am a wicked girl. If you tell him I'll—"

She paused suddenly and her dark face softened; then she again laid her hand on Zoe's arm, this time softly. It had suddenly occurred to her that they ought to be friends, since their lovers were in similar trouble, and she said as much. The idea pleased Zoe, and, drawn to her wild companion as she had never been before, a friendship was cemented the result of which no one could tell; but Meg was

just urging the seemingly wild idea of their going on the trail together to rescue the prisoners when a new actor appeared on the scene.

A man of such strange and uncouth characteristics as to hold even Meg speechless invaded the cabin and opened his huge mouth in a good-natured grin.

"Hello, gals!" he cried. "What sort o' a pancake is on ther griddle now? Ef thar's eatin' ter be did, jest put my name down on ther menu an' give ther hysterical hydrostatic a chance at ther spiles. I'm Howlin' Hank, the handsome Hyena from Hard Luck, an' I'm a good man ter tie to. See ther strings ter do it, don't yer?"

He waved his rags like so many flags and Zoe shrunk back, thinking he was a madman, but Meg was not at all alarmed.

"What do you want here, you old scare-crow?"

"He! he! I've come ter stay with you two ter keep enemies off. I'll be yer scarecrow, yer defender, and nobody kin come nigh ye. I'm a hard ticket ter punch an' good till used; see date on back. Free passes ter them yer don't like; nobody but lovers allowed 'round ez dead-heads."

"See here, old man, you'd better get out of here and go home—if you know the way."

"Ef I know it? Wal, I reckon I do. Thar ain't a foot o' ground within fifty mile o' Tombstone I don't know. I'm ther great American traveler from Walkertown, an' ther rider o' an untamed steed from ther pampas."

"Are you well acquainted around here?"

"Know ev'ry place an' ev'ry pusson, white, red or crazy-quilt color."

"Do you know the Apaches?"

"Best friends I've got. When with 'em I'm a big Medicine Man from Doctor's Delight."

"See here, some friends of ours have been taken prisoners by the Apaches. Can you help us to rescue them? Are you really acquainted with the Indians? Have you influence with them?"

Zoe did not at all approve of the turn conversation was taking, but Meg knew that such half-crazy men as this old fellow seemed to be often had the power to go and come among the Indians freely, and he might be better than an ordinary man.

"Have I?—do I?—am I?" answered he. "Wal, you kin bet! I'm Howlin' Hank, ther handsome Hyena from Hard Luck an' ther traveler from Walkertown, an' ther Injuns are my playmates. Rescue yer friends? 'Course I will, gals; chuck on yer bunnits!"

And the matter was settled, for weal or woe, though it looked like one of the maddest plans on record.

CHAPTER XI.

HOW PLANET PETE SUCCEEDED.

ALBERT HARDY had been very successful in getting rid of the two boys, for, as the reader has suspected, the attack in the gulch was but a cunning trap laid by him. He had no claim on the Wheelock property, for he was not of the family and had never heard of any one except the Orlando who had become so mysteriously missing; and when the real heirs appeared on the scene he saw the necessity of getting them out of the way at once.

Hence, the abduction of Dan.

After the two boys had been carried away by the Apaches Hardy arose from the ground, where he pretended to be left for dead, and looked after them with a chuckle.

"I flatter myself that wasn't badly done," he said. "My men acted their parts well, and I reckon Mister Dan don't turn up again until I have scooped in the cash I'm after. Now, to wage war on old Paul. Of course he has heard by this time about the appearance of the genuine Wheelocks, but I opine I can fix that all right."

And then he left the gulch and walked away to where he was to meet Jack Low. The latter had kept out of the sight of Paul since the burial affair in the gulch, but he was in good condition and ready to play the next card in the game to get a bonanza out of the colonel.

Hardy was confident he had not been connected with the kidnapping of the boys, and if he had no one seemed to care if they were kidnapped, so he walked over to the More Light in the early part of the evening to see how matters were progressing there.

All was as usual; the *habitués* of the saloon were engaged in their old amusement, and nobody seemed to care because Tombstone Tom and Dan had gone off the scene; but Mr. Jolly could not so soon forget that a body had been stolen from his premises.

In one sense he was not sorry, but, as he ex-

pressed it, he would "be durned ef he could cotton ter ther ijee o' hev'n' folks help their-selves ter anything about his premises, vallyble or otherwise," and he was ready to talk of his grievance to any one who would listen.

Hardy listened, but he took care not to ask any questions which should put himself forward too much.

He soon left the hotel and started for a place Jack Low had arranged for his occupancy—for he dared not stay at the More Light, now that war was formally declared with Paul.

"I'm on the high road to success," he muttered, as he strode homeward. "That infernal young rascal of a Dan is out of the way and no one cares, and now I shall bring old Paul right down on his knees. I wonder if it was he who stole that corpse? If so, I can't see his object; in fact, I can't see what any one wants of it. There may be a mystery somewhere that I haven't caught on to yet."

He had allowed himself to fall so deeply into thought that he was not paying due attention to his surroundings, but he was suddenly recalled to the present as a man sprung out from behind a cabin and made a vicious dash at him.

If Hardy had not been an agile man that moment would have been his last, for a long knife made a sweep at his heart, but he dodged with commendable celerity and merely received a scratch on his shoulder.

Another instant and he had seized his would-be assassin and a desperate struggle began. The unknown clung to the knife and tried to get a chance to use it, and Hardy did his best to secure and use it as his adversary had attempted to do on him.

Back and forth they struggled, their feet making deep holes in the sand, but Hardy was not only strong and quick but skilled in such matters; and with a quick twist he finally doubled the man over in a painful position and, his grip loosened on the knife, wrenched it away and struck with all his force.

The knife went home; the unknown's hold relaxed; he hung a dead weight in Hardy's arms; and as the latter lowered him to the ground he saw that he was forever past fighting.

"Wiped out, by thunder! but who is he, and why has he tried to kill me? Ha! I know him: it is Planet Pete, old Paul's right bower, and it isn't hard to see what he was driving at. So, the colonel has set his assassins on me and—this is the result!"

The result was favorable to Hardy, for he had got rid of a man who might not have failed thus ordinarily, but the victor had lived a hard, adventurous life and looked at it philosophically.

"By my life!" he suddenly added, "I'll give old Paul a waker on this which may teach him not to set his assassins on me in such a way. I'll show him he can't run all creation!"

Colonel N. Paul was alone in his library when the door opened and his hopeful son entered.

"Well," said the elder man, abruptly, "have you been to the More Light?"

"Of course. Didn't you send me there?" flip-pantly answered Nelson.

"Yes, but you don't always go and come as I tell you, as I have observed. Well, what is the news?"

"Nothing."

"Young Wheelock's still missing?"

"Yes."

"It's queer," said the colonel, frowning. "There is something about this affair I don't understand. Now, it isn't reasonable to suppose that real Apaches have come to the settlement in that way and gobbled him up; I believe they were white men in disguise. Can it be Tombstone Tom is at the bottom of it?"

"More likely it was Hardy," said Nelson, who shared his father's secrets.

"Ha! you have hit the nail on the head now; strange I didn't think of it before. You have a head on you, Nelse. Of course it was Hardy. He is no more John G. Wheelock than he is Kit Carson, and he clearly saw that he couldn't work me for any money when the real heirs were on the field. Hence the abduction of that Dan. Good! I am glad to see the rival factions working against each other. Let Hardy put the boy out of the way, and Planet Pete wipe out Hardy, and we are all salubrious. Aha! my boy, we may hold on to Orlando Wheelock's twenty thousand yet!"

The colonel rubbed his hands together in rising spirits.

"Is Orlando dead?" asked Nelson, looking at his father keenly.

"Of course; if he wasn't he would come forward."

"How did you kill him?"

"Hush! hush! I didn't kill him, boy. I know no more about the matter than you do, but it isn't likely he would stay away from his mine if alive."

"Don't try to fool me, old man," coarsely exclaimed Nelson. "Perhaps I don't know that about the time Orlando was expected here you came in one night with your shirt all spattered over with blood!"

"You dry up!" quickly answered the colonel, a startled look appearing on his face. "Remember walls have ears and trifles often hang a man. You dreamed all this."

The speaker arose, went to the window where Tombstone Tom had once spied upon him, and looked out. No spy was there then, and he returned to his chair.

"I am puzzled to know why Hardy has stolen Alfred Wheelock's body," he added.

"Was he the thief?"

"Who else could it be? Who else would have any object in taking it?"

"Well, what object could Hardy have in taking it? You just said you couldn't see any. You ain't logical, old man."

"Logic be hanged! Of course Hardy was the man—Hullo! what was that?"

A tremendous pounding had sounded at the outer door. Colonel Paul frowned, but as it was repeated it occurred to him that Planet Pete might be there with important news.

"Why don't Julius open the door?"

"Because Julius is over at the More Light getting full," Nelson condescended to say.

The colonel leaped up and, as a third loud knocking sounded, hurried from the room and down stairs closely followed by his amiable heir. He opened the door quickly and then sprung back several feet.

The moment the door swung inward a human form followed it and dropped on the floor with a dull thud. Both the Pauls uttered a startled exclamation, for they were looking on the white, set face of Planet Pete.

Neither spoke further for several seconds, but they needed no close examination to show them their tool was forever done with life; they could even see a slash in his mining shirt where the fatal knife had gone home. And neither of them felt like dashing outside to look for the slayer.

"This must be attended to—it may be best to keep the matter secret," finally muttered Paul, senior. "Pull him inside so we can close the door."

The first part was attended to, and when the colonel had looked out for the second he turned about and saw Nelson holding a slip of paper in his hand. He silently passed it to his father, and the latter saw these words, written in red characters, the nature of which could not be mistaken:

"If Colonel Paul wants to preserve his tools he had better keep them at home, under lock and key. That's the safest way!"

There was no signature to this sanguinary message, but, remembering what had been Planet Pete's duties, his employer needed none.

"This is Hardy's work!" he exclaimed.

"Well, it's so ably done that I reckon Pete won't worry him any more. The knife went as true as a die."

Colonel Paul wiped the perspiration away from his forehead with a nervous motion. He had not been prepared for any such event. Planet Pete had been a bold knave, one who seemed as well able to care for himself as any man in Tombstone, and his sudden taking off was unexpected.

"This is terrible!" he muttered.

"Bah! don't show the white feather, old man. I'll tell you how to get out of it if you'll do me a favor."

"Done!" said the colonel.

"You know you can control almost every rough in Tombstone, by using money a little. Well, just go to Sam Slasher and Ben Kipp and set them on Hardy's trail. Use every tough in town."

"That's the way to do it; I'll make a clean sweep. Now, for the return favor. What can I do for you?"

"I want Meg Low," said Nelse, scowling. "I have a fancy for her, and the jade scoffs at me. Let me shut her up here while I break her spirit, will you?"

The colonel looked blank at first, for he regarded Meg as a very low person, but Paul, junior, had his way, as usual, and the compact was made.

CHAPTER XII.

CLOSE CORNERS FOR TWO.

"It's daylight ag'in, but I don't derive no abnormal benefit from it. I'd druther hev a quarter-section o' beefsteak than an electric light o' a million hoss-power, b' mighty!"

The speaker was Tombstone Tom, and he and Dan Wheelock sat on the floor of a rock den, which nature had made a convenient dungeon. They had just awoke from sleep, and were looking up at a hole in the rocks above.

"I wonder if we are to be starved, Tom?"

"Things takes on that complexion, don't they? Jew's-harps an' June-bugs! I have a vacarcy in my anatomical structure where you could drive in a hoss an' tip-cart. Wish ye would, b' mighty! an' then tip out some victuals—no objection ter cold grub."

"I am hungry, too."

"You look it. Thar is a careworn shadder on yer face that tells fur a cravin' arter somethin'."

"I could eat a bear. I wish the one we saw when we came in would make a tour this way and fall in."

"Hol' on! Reckon you ain't up in grizzly nat'ral history. The game o' eatin' is one Ole Eph kin play at, an' I'm afeard he would masticate us both an' holler fur more, an' 'tain't fash'nable now fur wild beastis ter throw up grub ez 'twas in Jonah's time. Ef he got us down, we'd hev ter stay thar unless we disagreed with his internal symphony."

The two boys were in a cave in the mountains, to which they had been conveyed by their captors just after they were seized in Grin-and-bear-it Gulch. Since being put in they had not seen any of their captors, and the one meal of food given them had hardly served to satisfy two healthy boys for thirty-six hours.

They had tried in vain to get out, but four walls of rock arose fifteen feet around them without foothold of any kind, and there they had remained ever since.

"But this is better than torture," said Dan, after a pause.

"I don't reckon we'll be tortured, fur, ez I've said afore, I don't reckon thar is any Injun in ther case. Them chaps was painted pale-faces, an' N. Paul, cunnel U. S. A., was ther varmint that set 'em onter us."

"You stick to your theory."

"A few. When I git one I'm like a porous-plaster; I look nice an' innocent, but ye can't git me off without takin' ther cuticle, too. But I am good fur lame backs!"

"You're a queer fellow, Tom."

"I hev ter be ter sustain my elevated position in society. Sam Slasher would have wrung my neck some time previous ef he hadn't found me too queer ter meddle with. He tried it onc't—a couple year back—an' then he went inter ther horsepital fur aged an' infirm toughs that meddled with a mule's heels. I made a map of Sa'rah Desert in five places on his shins."

Tom's courage and good spirits never failed, and when Dan was tempted to despair his breezy remarks cheered him wonderfully.

But the day was destined to bring forth a fresh trial for the boys, and the event began to develop a couple of hours later. Two men appeared at the top of the pit, flung down a rope and directed them to ascend. Dan was inclined to refuse, but Tom had a different idea and they were soon on the level. Each captor—neither of them was an Indian—then took a prisoner and they started along the passage. Tom was tempted to knock his man down but thought better of it and went along talking cheerfully.

They were led to a cave-chamber in which were five other men, all masked, with the grizzly bear before mentioned, at one side.

"Boy," said one of the masked men, addressing Tom, "will you do me a favor?"

"Wal, I was allays reckoned a lib'ral-minded chap from my 'arliest infancy, but I never buy a hoss till I see him," Tom replied, cautiously.

"Well, I am going to appoint you keeper of our bear, yonder. Your duty will be to feed and care for him in every way, and to play with him when he is in the mood."

"I may ez wal remark in this tense that I was taught never to play with edged tools," said Tom, looking suspiciously at Eph.

"You'll find him good company."

"Ez long ez I am only a corporal, I don't hanker ter command him. I think I see blood in his eyes, though it may be raspberry jelly."

"Bah! are you afraid?"

"Jest a leetle timid; besides my natur' is nat'rally backward an' retirin'."

"You can't retire here. Take this collar and put it on his neck," and the outlaw held out the article in question.

"P'raps ther b'ar don't want ther collar-y."

"Silence! Your tongue runs too pertly. Do as I bid you or you shall have forty lashes on your bare back."

"Bareback exercise is sometimes better nor harnessin' a grizzly, but I'll see what Old Eph thinks about it."

Tombstone Tom accepted the collar, but there was no alacrity about his manner. He knew perfectly well that something unpleasant was on the bills. All these men would not be there for nothing; at the very least they meant to have some rough sport at his expense. Perhaps it was intended that Eph should kill him. He certainly looked vicious enough.

But Tom took the collar and advanced with a light step. The grizzly was squatted down and eying them with a sort of subdued sullenness, but he looked with interest as the boy approached and then suddenly sat upright.

Tombstone Tom paused, but the masked man sharply ordered him forward.

"Eph heza way which don't strike me favorable," the boy admitted. "Ef I kin read physiognomy, he's on his ear, meteorologically speaking. I'm afeared there'll be a family fracas. Whoa, Eph, take it cool an' let your wool grow. Yer genial face impresses me favorable on ther hull, an' we orter be friends. Whoa, Eph—Ther blazens!"

Tom broke off suddenly as the grizzly made a vicious stroke at him with his long claws exposed—a blow which would have struck and terribly mutilated a less agile person; but he leaped quickly out of the way, and then wheeled about.

"Ef you went ther durned ole Urso Major harnessed, you kin do it yerself!" he said in disgust.

"I command you to do the work!" sharply answered the masked man, stamping his foot.

"No use, guv'nor—I shan't do it. Ef I've got ter be hushed up anyhow, I prefer a reg'lar cleaver, not Ole Eph's toe-nails."

The outlaw turned to the two men first mentioned and they advanced with *quirts*, the vicious-looking whip of the Mexican cowboy.

"Now then, you will be lashed until you obey. Take your choice—tame the bear, or be flogged!"

Dan Wheelock, who had never before seen his young friend stirred out of his easy good-nature by the severest experience, was surprised at the look which passed over his face. His lips were tightly compressed, and his eyes flashed with a light which boded no good to the outlaw if the tables were ever turned.

As the men advanced with the whips, however, the imperiled boy marked out a course of procedure, and all his old coolness and resolution came to his aid to help carry it out. He retreated from the men, still holding the collar, and Dan felt his flesh creep as the grizzly stretched out his paws as though longing to clasp the boy in a death-embrace, his claws showing plainly; but the intended victim was the coolest person there.

As the men were about to strike, Tombstone Tom, with a sudden spring, shot over the astonished grizzly's head like a rocket.

The outlaws had not expected this, but what followed surprised them even more. The boy had his attention fixed on a fire which burned at the other side of the den, and as soon as he came down on his feet he darted toward it and snatched out a brand three feet long—a stick to which the flames had communicated only at one end.

With this he wheeled about, and none too soon. Old Eph was showing the true kind of temper he possessed and preparing to rush to close quarters—no one could handle him except those he knew—but all this had been foreseen by the young prisoner, who was now resolved to carry the war into the enemy's camp with a vengeance.

Holding the firebrand directly in front of him, he sprung forward with a yell. The instant the fire touched Old Eph's nose, he joined in the chorus with a roar which almost seemed to shake the cave, and in a moment more he was in retreat, his teeth exposed and his eyes flashing furiously.

The outlaws read mischief in his expression and turned to flee, but they were too late. Tombstone Tom pursued hotly and the grizzly sprang at the masked leader with a terrible roar. One blow of his strong paw knocked the man down, senseless and bleeding, and then Old Eph, who had lost his head completely, and didn't know friend from foe, dashed at the remaining men, who fled precipitately.

Only Dan of the group stayed behind.

"Now's our time!" said Tom, quickly. "We

wanter git outer this quicker'n greased lightnin' arter a 'tater-bug. Now, or never, is ther battle-cry o' freedom!"

He caught up the revolver of the fallen outlaw—who was good for a week in bed, with such wounds—and the pards, still keeping the torch, dashed along the passage in a course opposite to that taken by their late captors.

"Keep yer eyes open fur a free exit, Dan," said the Tombstone boy. "All depends on gittin' out afore them chaps git down ter biz ag'in. Ef we don't do it they'll pull our hides off over our heads like we would our shirts."

CHAPTER XIII.

FRESH COMPLICATIONS ARISE.

DAN WHEELOCK did not answer; but he followed readily enough at Tom's heels. It had been a very wise precaution to hold on to the firebrand, which now served as a torch, and they were able to pursue their way at considerable speed.

"Don't know whar this avenue 'll take us," said the Tombstone boy, as they hurried on; "but I reckon ef we hold onto our sand we kin now set up in biz ez untarried Tartars from Tartville. Ef we see a foe we must wade inter him up ter our arm-pits."

"I think if we use our revolvers we shall be excusable."

"We won't stop ter be excused: but—"

Tom paused suddenly. In their haste they almost ran plump upon a man who was sitting in an easy-chair made out of a barrel—the outlaw-guard, beyond a doubt—but Tom had no respect for his office; he made one forward leap, and chair and man went rattling over together before the guard could recover from his amazement.

And then the young pards shot through the rocky opening which served as a door, and were once more free under the unclouded sky.

But it would not do to pause yet; they executed some zigzag work to prevent the guard from shooting them, if he had an ambition that way; but no further trouble occurred to them, and they soon reached Tombstone. Tom had been unusually silent on the way, and he now paused and faced his companion.

"See hyar, pard, we hev settled this matter that we owe this racket ter Colonel Paul, an' that ther chap who decoyed us from ther village was his tool, ain't we?"

"Well, yes."

"Then what's our bill o' fare?"

"We must look out and not get caught again."

"Kerect; but see hyar: I propose we go right inter town ez though nothin' had happened, throw out no insinuations, an' ef we met ther decoy ax him how he escaped—in short, act jest ez though we didn't hev any idee who did ther biz fur us. This, yer perceive, will put ther enemy off ther guard, an' while they is chewin' ther cud o' bliss we will be preparin' a blister."

Dan agreed that this was the best way, and they went on again. They entered the village and were proceeding toward the More Light, when, while passing the cabin of Pedro Castro, Dan suddenly found himself in the grasp of the old man, who then attempted to shake him off, though his feeble arms were scarcely fit for the work.

Another person had followed him out of the cabin, and Tombstone Tom started a little as he recognized Albert Hardy.

"What have you done with her?" cried old Castro, wildly, as he went on with the shaking. "Bring her back, villain, or I'll strangle you!"

Dan was not troubled by the threat, but the question was of more importance, if his sudden suspicion was correct.

"Bring who back, sir? What are you talking about?"

"My daughter—my Zoe! Bring her back, I say."

"Where is she?"

"Gone—and you have stolen her! Dog! where have you hidden her?"

Dan kept as cool as possible and called for an explanation, and after some delay Castro managed to state that Zoe was missing from the village. He charged Dan with having taken her away and claimed that he could prove it.

"The last statement is a little strong," said Hardy, advancing, "but Meg Low was overheard to say that she and Zoe were going to elope with these two young men. We only have their words for it."

Tombstone Tom strode forward and faced Hardy.

"Whar's yer proof?" he angrily asked.

"Jack Low heard his daughter say so."

"Thar's a lie somewhar, an' don't ye forgit it. Me elope with Meg Low? Wal, I reckon not, a few times. Durn yer pictur', I don't b'lieve a word ye say; I don't b'lieve Meg Low ever said so, an' I do think this hull yarn was made up by you. Ye're a lying varmint, anyhow!"

Tombstone Tom had forgotten his own advice to go light and easy, but this fresh falsehood was a little too much to be borne with meekness.

"What do you mean, sir?" shouted Hardy angrily.

"How dare you accuse me of a falsehood?"

"I didn't; I said you was a liar," Tom explained.

"Take it back, you young hound! or I'll ram it down your throat!"

"Don't take yer fist fur ter do it; I will b'ar it; thar's too much dirt on't!"

Hardy muttered a profane exclamation and struck out furiously at the youth, but the latter agilely dodged and, darting in to close quarters, tripped Mr. Hardy and laid him on his back with an audible jar.

"Mebbe you kin shed a tear fur ther rise an' fall

o' ther Roman empire now," said Tom, grimly, as he flourished his fist around Hardy's nose.

"Let me up, you young dog!"

"Call me that ag'in an' you'll feel my teeth. Let you up? Not much! You been lying ter old Castro hyar, an' by mighty, you've got ter take it back ef you rise ter future greatness."

Hardy stormed and foamed, but his young conqueror did not hesitate to menace him with his revolver, and as he remembered that he had another and more important game—the fight for the money he hoped to get from Colonel Paul—he decided to back down on the present issue, and did so. He acknowledged that Meg had not been heard to say anything about the matter, but that Jack Low had said his daughter was in love with Tombstone Tom and he thought she had run away with him.

"Holy Peter!" exclaimed Tom, "thar's nothin' like livin' an' larnin'. I never s'pected Meg was taken that way, but she shows her good sense, by mighty. Ez fur you, I reckon ther sight o' yer coat-tails disappearin' in ther hazy distance would be ez welcome ez anything else 'round hyar."

"Senor Castro, I want to warn you against these boys," Hardy persisted. "I have reason to believe they are leagued with the Apaches and—"

"Oh! go 'long; 'tain't safe fur you ter tell sech lies. You'll set yer garments afire with brimstun' an' be turned inter a pillar o' salt, ez Lot's wife was."

"You're well versed in Bible history, ain't you?" sneered Hardy, tempted to try a shot at the boy.

"Never you mind; we had better confine our remarks ter subjects you kin grapple, an' ther most alloorin' one is—do I see ye a-dustin'?"

Hardy looked mad with wrath, but he forced his anger down.

"I am going," he said, "but don't you flatter yourself you have seen the last of me. I'll make you howl, yet!"

"When ye hear my voice floatin' up ther valley, jest let me know on't, will ye?" requested Tom.

But Hardy did not pause to answer. He strode away, never looking around, and the boys were left with Senor Castro.

The latter had become calmer since his late visitor confessed his story had been a falsehood, and he explained the trouble as clearly as he could. The case was a simple one; he had awoke in the morning to find Zoe gone, and there was no clew to her whereabouts or the cause of her going. He was too demoralized by the fact to reason at all, but Tombstone Tom's mind soon became active and he expressed the opinion that Hardy had abducted her, claiming that it was clear the fellow had taken a fancy to her.

The boys promised to do what they could for her and then left the old man to his sorrow. It was hard luck for him, but they could not do anything more just then. Dan, however, confessed that he had taken an interest in her, and it was agreed that they should try to find both her and Meg.

Tom scouted the idea that the latter had been concerned in the abduction, and though he wound up with his usual assertion that Low's daughter was a "hard case," Dan began to suspect he really had more interest in her than he would acknowledge.

The complicated question of how they were to find the two girls was settled much easier than they expected, and by the return of Zoe and Meg, themselves. They came in without any escort, and as no great hue and cry had been made over their absence, settled down to the old life in a quiet way, but both declined to give any account of their brief absence.

Really, the Hyena from Hard Luck had proved to be far less a guide than he claimed to be, while, once clear of the town, he betrayed such eccentricities that they decided he was actually too demoralized mentally to be of any good; while his utter neglect of the natural precautions of the trail convinced Meg that if he knew anything about the business he was not in condition to employ the knowledge in a practical way.

Consequently, they left him and returned.

"Well, the only result of this is our quarrel with Hardy," said Dan.

"No, it ain't," replied Tom, with a quick nod of his head. "The critter has showed his hand an' I begin ter see daylight in the matter, a rosy blush on ther sawtooth horizon o' Time, ez it war. Just you hold yer hoss a bit an' we will kerry ther campaign inter ther enemy's own camp an' show 'em we're bad men from Wicked Holler. See ef we don't!"

CHAPTER XIV.

COLONEL PAUL HAS VISITORS.

THE elder Paul was once more alone in his library, his hopeful son having gone off on some piratical expedition, when Julius, the colored servant, ushered in a visitor. The colonel quickly arose to his feet.

It was Albert Hardy, again.

"Hallo, old veteran, how are you?" quoth the visitor, in his blandest manner.

"I—I am quite well," stammered Paul, who had not forgotten Planet Pete's untimely end.

"Glad to hear it. Sit down and make yourself at home. You see your backwardness forces me to assume the doing of the honors. Cigars in your box, I see. Good! I'll take one since you insist so strongly."

The man's cool assurance almost took Paul's breath away, and no more was said until he had taken a seat and was puffing carelessly at the cigar.

"I called around to settle up our business, my worthy veteran," Hardy then added.

"What business?" Paul tartly asked.

"Why, the payment to me of the fifteen thousand due the heir of Orlando Wheelock."

"You won't get any fifteen thousand, sir!"

"No? And why not?"

"Because, in the first place, I owe nothing to such heirs. I never saw Orlando Wheelock and do not owe him anything."

"I beg your pardon, but you owe the twenty thousand dollars he put into the Yellow Jack Mine."

"It is false, sir; he never put a dollar into it."

"Seems to me you speak more confidently than you did when I called before."

"I will tell you why. When you came here with your absurd story I had a presentiment from the very first that you were not acting honestly. If Orlando Wheelock was missing as you said, and you did not know into whose mine he had put money, it was natural you should fix on me as the owner of said mine—I was likely to be the man as any one else. All this I saw, but from your manner I had a suspicion that you were not Wheelock's heir. Consequently, I put you off so I could have time to investigate. Now, I am not only convinced that you are not a Wheelock, but the real heirs have appeared on the scene. If I was the man who took the said Orlando for a partner—which I am not—I should treat with young Daniel, not with you. As it is, I forbear prosecuting you only on condition that you get out of Tombstone as quick as your legs will carry you."

Hardy had listened to this long address with outward nonchalance, but he was really more disturbed than he cared to show.

"This is nonsense," he brusquely said.

"You will find it the hardest kind of sense, sir."

"Do you think you can bluff me?"

"I think I can foil an impostor."

"Perhaps you have more Planet Petes in the back-ground."

Hardy regretted the remark as soon as it was made.

"Aha!" cried the colonel, "you confess that murder, do you?"

"I confess nothing, but I would have you understand you can't deprive me of my rights. Orlando Wheelock paid you twenty thousand dollars for a share in the Yellow Jack, and as I am his heir I am going to have the money."

"How will you get it?" coldly asked the colonel.

"By law, if necessary."

"You will not, for you dare not claim to be the heir. The arrival of young Daniel has spoiled your game. I defy you!"

Hardy glared at the speaker in subdued rage. He knew it was a small chance when he came to the house, but he had risked all and made an effort to carry it through. Now, he saw plainly that the colonel had taken a firm stand and was not to be frightened by any means yet tried. But he was withholding his trump card for the last.

"I'll make it to your interest to compromise with me."

"How?"

"Dan Wheelock is here and looking for his uncle, but he does not know into what mine Orlando bought. Pay me ten thousand dollars and he shall never know; refuse, and I will go to him at once and tell him where to look for his money—to Colonel N. Paul!"

The latter smiled coldly.

"What proof will you offer?"

"I have proof enough."

"Again, I defy you!"

Hardy uttered a furious exclamation.

"Don't fly too high," he cautioned, "for I have the means of bringing you to your knees. I will produce Orlando Wheelock, himself!"

"The same as you have produced John G. Wheelock?" sneered Paul, taking a fresh cigar.

"Jeer on, but let me tell you the game is in my hands. You may believe me or not, but Orlando Wheelock is alive and I can produce him at any hour. I am his agent; for reasons which I need not state he prefers to keep out of sight for a while, and he will take ten thousand and call it square. Now, hear me: You have this chance for a compromise, and I swear to you that if you do not accept it Orlando will come to Tombstone and force you to disgorge the whole, as well as show you up in your true colors!"

Paul remained unmoved by the threat.

"You are at liberty to do whatever you see fit, sir. It is clear that you are a mere adventurer, and for such I have the utmost scorn. As for Orlando, if he is alive, I am glad of it—but I doubt it. And as for me, I am not the man you take me to be; I do not owe one dollar to Wheelock, nor does he own a dollar in the Yellow Jack. This is all I have to say, sir—good-day!"

Mr. Albert Hardy would have been duller of mind than he was had he failed to see that further talk was useless, but though he concluded to retire, he had no intention of giving up the battle. He wanted time to think, however. He made a few appropriate threats and took his departure.

When once more alone, Paul's confident air vanished.

"It is closing in," he muttered, nervously, "and if I don't look out I shall get into trouble. It would make a pretty stir in the moneyed world if the matter leaked out. In some way I must put both Dan Wheelock and this Hardy out of the way. It is more than pecuniary gain—it is personal safety—that I hang on to Orlando Wheelock's money and bluff my enemies. I'll see Sam Slasher at once."

He reached for his hat, but just then there was a sound of angry voices outside the room. Paul changed color, but at that moment the door was flung open and a man entered with Julius close at

his heels; it was clear he was entering despite the negro's remonstrances.

The intruder was no stranger to us, being the Hyena from Hard Luck, but Paul had never seen him before. He marked him down at once and his fear turned to anger.

"Get out of here!" he ordered.

"Nary git," answered Howling Hank. "When I come ter stay I hang on like a tooth-ache. Scipio, git!"

The last order was addressed to the negro.

"Julius, throw him out!" said Paul, in disgust.

"You hold yer hosses, my nabob," said Hank, with a grimace. "I don't go till I git good an' ready, an' you kin bet high on't. A short hoss is soon curried, an' ef you'll send out yer bottle o' ink that you call Julius, I'll soon be done. Let him stay, an' thar'll be war. I'm ther Hyena from Hard Luck, an' I'm a harrer'n' epidemic among young goslin's. I've got suthin' ter say about a sartain twenty thousand dollars."

Paul started.

"Well, I'll humor you. Julius, leave us for a few moments."

The negro went, and then the colonel fixed his attention on Howling Hank with a troubled look on his face. The man had mentioned twenty thousand dollars. Was all the world coming to hound him about that affair?

"Well, what have you to say?" he crustily asked.

"Don't ye re-cog-nize me, cunnel?"

"No, sir, I don't."

"My name, 'cordin' ter ther front leaf o' ther fambly register, is Orlando Wheelock!"

Paul started, and for a moment he looked actually alarmed, but his expression soon changed.

"What rubbish is this?" he harshly asked.

"Tain't no kind o' rubbish, my kickin' mule from Kickup. I'm O. Wheelock, Esquire, likewise grand and upright, an' I've come ter see about ther twenty thousand dollars I paid ye fur a shar' in ther Yaller Jack."

"You haven't paid me a cent, you old bummer."

"No, 'twas in big coin, but you got it jest ther same an' I am now 'round ter see about it. Shall I order a new sign painted, with Paul & Wheelock onter it?"

"Who in perdition is Wheelock?"

"See hyer, cunnel, don't shake a nold friend. Didn't we meet in Hard Luck and sign ther papers all straight—"

"Where are the papers now?" sharply interrupted Paul.

"I've lost 'em, but you are a squar' man an' won't see me anything out. I'm O. Wheelock, ez you kin plainly see."

"I don't see anything of the kind. I don't know Wheelock nor you, either. I'll trouble you to get out of my house. Do I see you going?"

"I reckon not," said the ragged man, a wild gleam in his eyes. "I'll hev ye know ye can't bluff me. I'm Howlin' Hank, the Hyena from Hard Luck, an' I'm a cunnel blizzard with a glass stopper. Tech me easy or I'll bu'st an' spread ruin around hyar knee-deep. Use me wal or I'll give ye a malignant fever which doctors can't cure."

"Cease your nonsense, will you? What do you want? Here, take this coin!"

Paul tossed a gold-piece down on the table, warily watching the Hyena, but no sooner did the latter see the money than his capacious mouth opened in a broad smile.

"You're ez ginorous ez a lord on 'lection day, cunnel, an' ef you want a backer any time, hyar bel, O. Wheelock, alias Howlin' Hank, ready ter act fur ye. Call at my office!"

At the last word the Hyena made a bolt for the door, and though Paul called after him did not stop until he was clear of the house. He left Paul in a very unsettled mood.

"Now, by all the fiends, who is this new claimant? I am sure he is not Wheelock—he can't be—so either Hardy or Dan must have sent him. But which was it, and what was the object?"

It seemed a great puzzle, but it would have been a greater one had he known that neither Dan nor Hardy sent the ragged man. What, then, was the meaning of his visit?

CHAPTER XV.

JACK LOW'S DAUGHTER.

"BRING me ther whisky-bottle!"

The speaker was Jack Low, the half-breed. He sat in his cabin with his heels elevated on the table, viciously smoking a short, black pipe. Plainly, he was in ill humor. He addressed Meg, who was just finishing the evening's work, and she obeyed the order, though in a way which made him scowl afresh.

"What's ther matter with yer heels?" he coarsely asked.

"Nothing," was the indifferent reply.

"Then shake 'em around livelier when I speak. I ain't goin' ter hev no drones in this beehive."

Considering that Mr. Low had not done a stroke of honest labor within his daughter's recollection, his criticism seemed far-fetched, but Meg received it with the hard indifference her unhappy life had made second nature. Jack drank, and then setting down the bottle, looked sneeringly at the girl.

"You've been on a fine racket, ain't you?" he questioned.

"What of it?"

"Nothin', only you needn't come back hyar an' put on no airs. I've got ye down fine."

"I reckon I'm a chip of the old block," Meg sullenly replied.

Jack raised the bottle as though to hurl it at her, but thought better of it, and replaced it on the table

as a step sounded outside the house. Then Albert Hardy walked in.

He nodded to Jack, and then glanced at Meg in a way which the half-breed understood, and he at once invented an errand to send her to the further end of the village, bidding her remain there for an hour.

She threw on her hat and left the cabin without a word; but not far did she go. Making a show of departing promptly, she returned to the cabin by a *detour*, and took position by the window where she could watch and listen.

Hardy was just taking a drink from the bottle, and when this was done he set it down and turned to his companion.

"I've come to talk business, and we'll attend to it at once. I have called on old Paul again."

"Well?" questioned Low, eagerly.

"He refuses to cash over a dollar; says he never saw Orlando Wheelock, and never sold a dollar of stock to him or any other man; in short, defied me right from the word go."

The half-breed muttered a curse.

"Wal, what are we goin' ter do about it?"

"Bring him to his knees. I've started in this business and I'll put it through; I swear it. Now, you know we can ruin old Paul easily enough, but the question is—how can we best feather our own nest?"

"What's your idea?"

"That we sell our secret to young Wheelock. He is here to learn all about his uncle, as you know, and he isn't a fool by a good deal. The only question is, can we get ten thousand, or such a matter, out of him? If we had a man to deal with I should know just how to proceed, but with a boy it is different. It would be time thrown away to ask him to sign a paper, for he is a minor, and when he knows the whole game he may kick over the traces."

"Yes, an' I'm sorter dubious about ther boyee, anyhow. He hez got that Tombstone Tom fur a pard, which don't argue none too wal in our favor, fur Tom is a sharp dog; an' ther I ain't jest easy about ther disa'pearance o' ole Alf Wheelock's body. Be you sure he was shot dead?"

"There can be no doubt about that."

"I'm afeerd o' a trap, but it might be wal fur you ter approach that Dan an' see how he'll talk."

"So I think, and I'll do it; but I must go in disguise. I have had trouble with the boys about Zoe Castro. I'm rather sweet on the little witch, as is Dan, and in order to get a point on him I showed my hand to-day and got caught at it. I must now go slow, but I'll manage to inform him that it was Colonel Paul who took Orlando Wheelock's money and never accounted for it after Orlando died; and I think we can raise such a breeze around the old man's head he will be glad to cave in and give us ten thousand to drop it."

"Good enough! Let's drink on the strength on't," said Low.

They drank, and their confidence momentarily increased; but Meg no longer listened. She perceived that the most important part of their conversation was past, and she withdrew to a safe distance to think over what she had heard.

Her better nature told her she ought to go to Dan Wheelock and let him know all she had heard; but she had never received any reward for doing what was right in the past, and of late she had let everything go with sullen apathy, almost indifferent to the dark plots in which Jack Low had a share.

Probably it would have been the same in the present case, but she thought of Tombstone Tom, and how Zoe had encouraged her to lead a different life, and she resolved to go to Dan and tell him all. Of course, it would estrange her from her father, but that was a smaller loss than even she realized.

So she started for the More Light Hotel.

It was an unlucky move for her, for human wolves were lying in wait and looking for just this chance; and as she passed a deserted cabin two dark forms suddenly appeared, a blanket was thrown over her head, and she was promptly lifted and borne away.

She tried to speak, to call for help, but the blanket prevented any outcry and even shut off all air; and as she gasped and nearly lost consciousness, she could only dimly understand that she had been carried into some house. But she was finally deposited in a chair, and as the blanket was removed she looked up, gasped, drew her hand across her eyes and recognized Nelson Paul.

"Ha! ha! my little dear!" laughed the young scoundrel; "you see I have taken you into comfortable quarters. My way wasn't so romantic as an elopement, but you are here all the same, and here you shall remain—mine, all mine! I must leave you now, but I won't forget you. Don't try to escape, for you see the windows are boarded up. Good-night, robin red-breast!"

He laughed again and went out, locking the door behind him. He had made good his intention, and imprisoned the girl in his father's house.

"I feel like hevin' a square feed o' steak, blood-red, with silver round ther edges. My internal sassage-factory is in a hanker'n' state o' mind. Reckon I've got ter give it double doses ter pay fur ther famine up in ther cave. Waiter, you kin take a three-year-old steer by ther horns an' lead him right in alive; I'll do ther carvin' myself."

Tombstone Tom was giving his order at the More Light, and though he indulged a little in exaggeration, the waiter understood what he meant and went away to fill the order.

"You don't seem over an' above cheerful, Dan," he added, after a pause.

"I was thinking about father. Tom, it is bad enough to lose a kind parent without being deprived of the chance to give him proper burial."

"Mebbe you kin, yet. When we git ole Paul down on his knees, we shall prob'ly scoop in several items o' interest—"

Tom paused suddenly, looked into the next room, and then added:

"What's Ben Kipp doin' 'round that steak o' mine? Durn his pictur', he's puttin' some noxious kind o' an ingredient onter it. Lay low! I have a 'spicion, and I'll make Mister B. Kipp, E-s-q., wish he had let it alone!"

"Perhaps it was poison he was putting on it."

"Jest my ijee," said Tom, coolly; "but you kin call me a swaller-tailed jack-rabbit ef his game works. Wait till that thar steak is done, an' we'll see."

The boy looked unusually determined, and Dan scented a battle not far off, but his young friend had never been calmer. When the odor of the steak was at its best, he arose and sauntered into the next room.

"Been ter supper, Ben Kipp?" he carelessly asked.

"No," answered the man.

"Come an' eat with me."

"Thank ye; I ain't hungry," was the quick reply.

"Not fur sech a steak ez that?"

"No. I ain't feelin' wal."

"Oh! ye ain't? Wal, allow me ter ask why ye sprinkled my meat with pepper?"

"Eh?"

"Oh! I see'd ye; no use ter play off innercent. Ye come in an' edged up ter ther fire when Jotham, the hash-baker, warn't lookin', an' ye sprinkled ther meat with some furin substance. Now, ev'ry cook should be willin' ter eat his own broth, an' I respexfully invite ye ter jine me at gnawin' ther steak."

"You'll hev ter excuse me," growled Kipp.

"On ther contraree, you'll hev ter eat. I ain't no hog, an' thar's steak enough fur two. Come up an' take a hack at it!"

Mr. Kipp was plainly ill at ease, but he feared to be ill in another way if he ate from the steak, so he peremptorily declined to join in the feast.

The next moment he found himself looking into Tom's revolver.

"I hate to press a gent ag'in' his will," drawled the boy, "but ez long ez you've peppered my steak you've got ter eat from it. Walk up, Benjamin, an' sample ther lay-out, er this six might accidently pepper you wuss than you did ther meat!"

CHAPTER XVI.

A SECRET FOR SALE.

BEN KIPP looked at Tom with a sullen fury in his manner, and murder in his heart. Bully that he was, he could not see himself at the mercy of a mere boy without deep chagrin, but he knew Tom, and was sure an attempt to draw would result disastrously to him.

His young adversary "held the drop."

Yet, come what might, Ben was resolved not to taste the meat. Better get a bullet through him.

"Come, now, you kid," he said with a sickly grin, "jest quit yer foolin'."

"I hain't foolin' no more than Tim Ryan's mule was, when it kicked off ther chimbley. I sez 'Eat, an' I mean eat.'"

"I'll take whiskey instead."

"You'll take steak or lead. You sprinkled some durned stuff on ther meat, an' I'm goin' ter see what faith ye hev in it. Ef it was p'izon, why did ye put it on?"

"I didn't put nothin' on," savagely declared Kipp.

"Then thar's no reason why you shouldn't eat. But I say you did, an' I accuse ye o' tryin' ter p'izon me. I want ye ter observe that I sleep with both eyes open, an' ye can't play no mule-tricks on me. I'm a weasel from Catnap Corner, an' if you buck ag'inst me you must look out fur squalls."

"You've said enough," observed Kipp, viciously, "an now ef ye don't close yer clam-shell I'll do it fur ye."

"When you can spell 'able' backwards you kin begin ter talk, but just now I hev ther drop. Eat ther steak!"

The revolver clicked ominously and Tom raised his voice to a sharp key. Ben trembled with impotent rage. All his old comrades except Sam Slasher were looking on to see him humbled by a boy, and it was the most bitter experience he had had for a year. But how was he to get out of it? He saw no way to turn the tables on Tom, while if he "caved" he knew very well it was death to eat the steak.

He had "doctored" it to kill.

"See hyar, Jolly," he said, turning to the landlord, "will you see one o' your giests insulted?"

"You know ther rules, Ben," said Mr. Jolly, meekly. "It is ev'ry one fur hisself."

"Ef you're so anxious ter git out on't as that," continued Tombstone Tom, "you kin settle ther hull business by makin' a clean breast on't. Jest let us know who hired you ter p'izon me an' we'll let ther stuff go uneaten."

Ben did not hear the offer. He had been desperately looking about for a way to get out of his fix, and he believed he saw it. Only one light had been lit in the room; if he could put that out he would stand a chance of saving his reputation.

Having decided thus he acted promptly. Close beside him sat the boot of a man who was easing his pet corn, and Ben caught this boot and hurled it at the light with all the force he could muster.

Crash!

The light went out with a tremendous noise, and as it did so Kipp deserted his seat. With the shrewdness born of past experience he moved toward Tombstone Tom and dropped flat. A moment more and the youth shot over him—or he would have done so had not Ben caught at his foot and brought him down.

Another moment and they were engaged in a

rough-and-tumble fight on the floor, and the crowd cheered lustily until two bullets whistled in among them; then there was a general inclination to seek safer quarters and they were left to fight it out.

When Mr. Jolly succeeded in getting a light again no one except himself and Dan Wheelock were in the saloon. Every door and window held the heads of several men who were anxious to be distant spectators of the fight, but the principals therein were not visible.

Dan was anxious for his friend, but as the men filed back in one of them consolingly remarked that "ther fighters has skedaddled, but ther bully boy will soon return an' we kin plant ther other rooster in ther mornin'."

This was not a very encouraging remark; but it was Tom who came back at the end of ten minutes. He came unhurt, nor had he done Ben Kipp any injury. That fellow had run so fast and far that the pursuer had given up the chase.

"But I reckon he won't p'izon my steak ag'in," chuckled the Tombstone boy. "I've gi'n him ther wu'st kind o' a scare, an' I reckon when we meet next it'll be shoot at sight."

Dan could not avoid a shiver, and wished himself safely out of so wild a country; but Tom ordered a fresh steak and ate it with as much composure as though nothing had occurred.

While they were eating Dan carelessly noticed a man who came in and ordered a drink; a man he noticed vaguely because he was new to the place, though not from any peculiarity. Judging by appearances, he had seen sixty years of life, and his hair and beard, both of which were worn full, were fringed with gray, while large spectacles partially hid his eyes.

Despite this, however, he was still a strong and muscular man.

The boys had finished their supper, and were leaning back in their chairs in a thoughtful mood when this old man approached them.

"What success have you had in your search for the body, young man?" he asked, in a gentle, low-pitched voice.

"None at all," answered Dan, looking at him keenly.

"It is a very singular matter, for it is hard to understand what the body could want of it. Were we in the East, we should naturally think of medical colleges; but not here, not here."

"I hope not," said Dan, with a shiver.

"Have you made no further advance with your other work?"

"To what do you refer?"

"The discovery of your uncle."

"No; I have learned nothing."

"Not even whose mine he bought into?"

"No. Why do you ask?"

Dan was looking more sharply at the old man, for it struck him there was not only a peculiarity about his manner, but a familiarity about his voice.

"Because I may be able to help you."

"Any information you can give will be thankfully received," Dan quickly answered.

"Is that all?"

"What do you mean?"

"I am an old man, young sir, and a poor one at that. Often I don't know one night ahead where I shall rest my head when I sleep. At my age one thinks of the future, and there is nothing like having a little money laid by for a rainy day."

"Speak plainly, sir."

"Very well, I will do so. In plain words, I can tell you to whom Orlando Wheelock paid his money, and paid it only to have that person hold fast to it when he knew Orlando could not appear to claim it."

"How did he know he could not appear to claim it?"

The stranger seemed confused for a moment and then replied:

"Perhaps I should say when he did not appear to claim it. Orlando Wheelock is missing, and missing men seldom reappear."

"As I understand the matter, you will tell me the name of this dishonest mine-owner if I pay you for your secret?"

"In plain words, that is it. I am sure that I know him and can place my hand on him within the hour, if necessary."

Dan was decidedly interested, and he decided at once that if the man would speak for any reasonable amount the money should be his. Tombstone Tom took no part in the conversation and, evidently watching the other men in the saloon, seemed deaf to all that was said near him. The old man glanced at him, now and then, in a half-nervous way, and from the manner in which he lowered his voice it was plain he preferred he should hear nothing.

"Well, what is your price for the secret?" Dan asked.

"Do you know how much Orlando Wheelock paid the mine-owner?"

"No."

"Twenty thousand dollars."

"Whew! That's a pretty good sum of money!"

"Yes; one well worth having. I should say. Now, suppose such a sum was lost irrevocably, and you had but one way of recovering it, how much would you be willing to give to get it?"

Dan scented a disposition on the part of the stranger to drive a sharp bargain.

"You are the man to set the price," he said, coolly, "and it is for me to say whether I will give it or not."

"Just as you say, and I will come to the point at once. What if I say ten thousand dollars?"

Dan looked surprised, and then a smile crossed his face.

"You do want a home for your old age, don't you?" he muttered with some sarcasm.

"Naturally."

"Well, I think I'll look further before I pay it."

"You do not know how well the mine-owner has laid his wires and covered up the trail of the past. I have reason to believe I am the only man now living who knows the secret, and you can hardly expect the mine-owner to come forward and expose himself."

"Do ye know what I think?"

Tombstone Tom turned suddenly from the crowd and faced the stranger. The latter started a little, but forced a smile to his face as he replied:

"Well, hardly, young man."

The right hand of the Tombstone boy shot out like a flash, and he grasped the stranger by the beard; then backward went the hand and the beard went with it. Despite the wig, spectacles and so forth, which remained, even Dan recognized the man who had a secret to sell.

"I think, Mister Albert Hardy, that Colonel Paul sent you hyar ter negotiate!" Tombstone Tom coolly said.

Hardy sat utterly dismayed for a moment. It was not so much that he was frightened, but he saw his scheme for winning ten thousand dollars tottering like a veritable castle in the air; while there was enough of mixed emotions so that he sat swallowing vaguely for several seconds and neither said nor did anything pertinent to the occasion.

Tom broke into a chuckling laugh.

"Don't ye think ye kin come no stage trick on me, mister," he said. "I dropped onter yer voice right away, ez a hen does onter a grub, an' hyar you be like a peeled 'tater. Pooty strategist, you be; a reg'lar Napoleon Hannibal!"

Hardy was deeply chagrined, but he thought quickly and resolved not to give up the work he had undertaken. If he could get the ten thousand he was not particular as to the means.

Just as he was about to speak, however, a hand seized his nose, his head was tipped violently back and a voice exclaimed:

"I say, Mister Man, let me see yer teeth. I want to know how old ye be!"

CHAPTER XVII.

HOWLING HANK GIVES INFORMATION.

HARDY uttered a furious exclamation and, wrenching away from the hold upon him, sprung to his feet. His hand had dropped to the pocket where he carried a revolver, but he hesitated about drawing when he saw the Hyena from Hard Luck.

"You old villain!" he roared, "I am tempted to put a bullet through you!"

"Yield not ter temptation," said Howling Hank, with a good-natured grin. "Bullets don't have no effect on me. I'm an iron-clad war vessel, triple-plated an' padded with cotton four bales thick! I'm Cap'n Kidd on a rampage an' a full-proof buccaneer o' ther Spanish Main."

"You'll be a corpse if you don't take care."

"Sho! no; a man would think ye was on yer shoot, but you look ez innocent ez a lamb. Yer benevolent blue eye ain't that o' a scorcher?"

"If you wasn't a crank I'd mighty soon show you how benevolent I am."

"Ef I'm a crank, mebbe you'll give me a full turn. Ther ban! will begin ter play ez soon ez ther steam is turned on an' ther new tune o' Yankee Doodle will tickle your tinpanum."

"Never mind, Hank," said Dan; "we are talking business here and can't stop to speak to you. Be so good as to stand one side for a short time."

"Oh! never mind me; I never hear what ain't said to me an' you kin go right on with yer council o' war. Don't let me interrupt."

The Hyena sat down, and as he really seemed of no account, Dan turned again to Hardy.

"Well, sir, are you still ready to talk business?"

Hardy looked sullenly from Tombstone Tom to the Hyena.

"Yes, I'll talk, but there will be bloodshed if I am pawed over much more. I'm a peaceable man, but you had better all look out how you misuse me."

"I s'pose that's meant fur me," observed Tom, "but I like to see every vessel sail under its r'ale colors. You can't warp in any stage make-up on me, fur I'm a needle with a small eye an' ye must spin yer thread fine ter thread me. Now, then, open yer clam-shell an' orate, an' I'll set in ther gallery an' ring in ther applause right vociferous."

"We can now talk on even terms," added Dan.

"Allow me to ask if you was sent here by Colonel Paul?"

"Certainly, I was not; I am able to blow my own bugle. Why do you mention Paul?"

"Because we think he is the man you want to sell out."

"Nonsense! Your idea is most absurd. I warn you if you want to get at the bottom of this mystery you must not deal in theories. I am the only man that can put you on the right track, and if you don't treat with me you can never get at the facts of the case."

"How did you learn them?"

"That must remain a secret for the present. Enough that I have the whole case in my hands."

"In plain words, you are a sharper who is on the make. A short time ago you were prating about your age and desire to have a home; now I find you to be a young man. In my opinion, sir, you are here as an agent for the mine-owner, be he Colonel Paul or some other man."

"Not by an infernal sight," said Hardy, angrily. "I am blowing my own bugle."

"You're blowin' out o' tune," interrupted Tombstone Tom, "an' this crowd don't want no more o' yer chin-music. It ain't sweet enough ter lull a baby ter sleep, nur strong enough fur business."

Pard Dan, I reckon we kin dispense with any more on't."

Tom's expression strongly urged Dan to take the same stand, and though he was reluctant to let a man who claimed to know so much go away untested, he decided to follow the course indicated; but, as he would not burn the bridge behind him, he informed Hardy that he must have time to think the matter over. With ten thousand dollars at stake, it was not a matter to be decided hastily.

Hardy tried in vain to change his decision, but when he saw it was no use, promptly withdrew from the room, saying he would see them again.

"Wait hyar till I come back," said Tom. "I'm goin' ter foller ther critter ter his den."

And he glided out after Hardy. Then Howling Hank seemed suddenly to awake from sleep or deep thought.

"Ef you're in s'arch o' information, mebbe I kin give ye a boost," he observed. "I'm a man that's about a good 'eal an' sees more nor most men. What d'ye s'pose I see'd ter-night, young feller?"

Dan absently replied that he did not know.

"Over in t'other part o' ther village lives a gal that is ez pooty ez a sunflower—Meg Low, they call her. She's been gobbled."

"Gobbled! By who?"

"Nelson Paul, they call him. Him an' Sam Slasher dropped on her like a chicken on a grasshopper, an' they've shut her up in old Paul's house. I see'd it, but ez I make it a pint not ter interfere whar I ain't wanted, I held my tongue, but ther idee is a-surgin' through me that something ought ter be did. Shall I go forth in my wrath an' t'ar ther house down, in Sampson style, or shall I not? Them is the questions."

Before Dan could answer Tombstone Tom returned. Despite his efforts Hardy had evaded him, but he was not perceptibly discouraged. He returned just in time, however, and Dan soon told him what the Hyena had revealed.

Tom's brows met in a frown.

"This must be looked inter. Meg is a gal who ain't o' much account in this hyar city, fur she's a hard case on wheels, but no man o' sand will sot still an' see her merlested by them Pauls. Business ain't drivin' now, an' I'll jest drop on them an' take her away. I'll spread myself out knee-deep an' give 'em ther wust epidemic see'd in a year."

Hardy took good care not to stop until he had reached a safe place, and by the time he did halt he had worked off a good deal of his superfluous wrath.

"I'm afraid the jig is up in that quarter, and all owing ter that infernal Tombstone Tom. I could wring his neck—ef he wasn't such a hard case to manage. My chances of getting any money out of Dan seem as slim as with Paul, and I think I must fall back on my last chance. I'll evacuate Tombstone before I get into worse trouble. Yes, but I won't go alone if I can help it. There's my charming Zoe; if I could abduct her and take her to the cave it would light up that dreary old hole wonderfully. I'll go down by old Castro's cabin and see if there is a chance."

It wasn't a very long walk. As he neared the humble home he saw that a light was still burning, and he crept up to the door with stealthy steps. Castro and Zoe were both in the main room; the former had fallen asleep in his chair, as old people do, but the girl sat at a table doing some kind of sewing.

Hardy's eyes sparkled. He had taken a great fancy to this bright, but gentle, girl, who was as lovely as a rose-bud, and though he was double her age, was resolved to win her by some means. That he could do it fairly was out of the question for, not only did she shrink from him, but he had shown his hand when he told the lie to the old man.

He must take her by force; he must carry her to his cave and gain a monopoly of her fresh beauty. He had told himself that with her as his wife he would abandon his present life and live honorably, but he was beginning poorly when he planned to abduct her.

As he saw her there by the table he lost all prudence and resolved to take her at once. He told himself he could easily get out of the village and to the mountains, forgetting that she might not be easily taken along, and he decided to waste no time.

He glanced once at Castro. He was still asleep. Hardy gathered himself for work and dashed into the cabin.

Zoe looked up with a startled expression, but before she could rise he had seized her in his strong arms and turned toward the door. She uttered a scream and Pedro awoke and sprang from his chair. Better for him had he been dazed and inactive, but he flew at the abductor like an eagle defending its young. His long, bony fingers seized Hardy's collar and his voice arose in alarming cries.

Hardy uttered a furious exclamation and, closing one hand, struck the old man full in the face. Castro's feeble hold relaxed; he uttered one groan and fell senseless to the floor.

Then the villain dashed from the cabin, carrying Zoe as though she had been a child, nerved by excitement with unusual strength. He turned his face toward the mountain and began his retreat.

Not many steps had he gone, however, when a hand was again laid on his collar and he saw a long knife lifted above him. He realized his danger and dropped Zoe, at the same time dodging agilely. The knife descended, but he received only a long, painful wound on his arm.

A moment more and his revolver was out. He turned its muzzle on his assailant and fired. There was no chance to miss, but it did not stop the unknown. He sprang upon him and the knife was driven home; then both men staggered, fell, and lay silent and motionless side by side.

CHAPTER XVIII.

TOMBSTONE TOM INVESTIGATES.

"THAR's a light in ther winder, but I don't reckon it's fur you, brother. Hows'ever, in I go ef I kin find a hole in ther coop, an' ef I do git in, thar'll be a moral epidemic among ther poultry, now you bet! I'm a puritanical terror when I take up ther gantlet o' war, an' I'll make ther dry bones rattle Old Hundred ter ther tune o' Yankee Doodle."

Tombstone Tom was taking a survey of Colonel Paul's house, preparatory to an attempt to enter. He seemed more indignant and troubled by the news that Meg Low was confined there than his avowed want of confidence in her would indicate, and if it was possible to get her out he intended to do it.

He had brought along the first means of the game in the shape of a ladder, and this he proceeded to set up against the side of the house, under a second-story window which showed no light within.

"Hyar goes fur ther ventur'. I'm liable ter be arrested fur bu'glery, but men must resk suthin' fer ther female sex, an' I allays was noted fur chivalry. Hyar goes!"

He went up the ladder with cat-like caution, and on reaching the window was pleased to find it unfastened. To raise the lower half and crawl inside was the work of but a short time, and he then drew up the ladder after him that it might not be seen by any one who might chance to pass the house.

The house was perfectly silent, so far as he could discover, but he knew the room in which he had seen the light was that of Colonel Paul, and he resolved to have a look at the man.

He opened the door and crept cautiously toward the other room, taking care not to hit against any obstacle.

As he advanced he heard the sound of voices, and applying his eye to the key-hole, saw Paul and his son seated at a table. The latter was smoking a fragrant cigar in an airy fashion, blowing wreaths of smoke and indulging in a good many flourishes, and Tom made a motion as though he would like to punch his head just for luck, but he refrained and listened again.

"I have strong hopes that Sam Slasher will succeed in putting him out of the way before he can do further harm," the colonel was saying. "Sam swears he shall not see another day dawn."

"Yes, but I reckon Hardy is as sharp as Sam," said Nelse.

"We'll hope for the best, anyway; and if Sam fails, we must set all Tombstone on him. He must not be allowed to tell Dan Wheelock what he knows."

"How much does he know?"

"He knows I am the man to whom Dan's uncle, Orlando, paid twenty thousand dollars."

"Yes, but do you take any stock in his assertion that he can produce Orlando Wheelock?"

"Bah! no. Orlando is dead."

"You swear you did not kill him."

"That is true. From the moment I parted with him at Hard Luck I have never seen him. I expected him to come on and become my partner, but as he did not I was sharp enough to keep his money and say nothing."

"Perfectly proper, but may it not be that Hardy has his thumb right on him? Perhaps he has; him shut up somewhere and is working his game for money as best he can. For instance, he might get ten thousand out of you—if you was fool enough to pay it—and then another ten from Orlando, to release him."

"I have thought of that. If it is so, the outlook is a bad one, and I confess things are not working to suit me. Now, there is that matter of the disappearance of Alfred Wheelock's body. If Sam Slasher was not so sure he was shot dead, I should suspect he is now alive."

"Have you any idea who shot him?"

"No, and that's where I am troubled again. I believe Sam must know, though he swears he don't, and the idea has just got into my head that Sam and Kipp have played a double game, somehow."

"Perhaps Hardy hired them to shoot him, for, of course, if he knew Alfred was on the scene it would knock his financial game all to pieces."

"By George! you have a head on you, my boy. There is reason in what you say," admiringly commented the colonel.

"Right ye be!" muttered Tombstone Tom under his breath. "Ther battalions is wheelin' into line an' ther rosy east shows signs o' dawn. This hyar conference puts several ideas inter my head, an' kerwobbleates them I had thar afore. I opine thar is goin' ter be a rambunctious blizzard 'round hyar soon."

He listened further, but the precious pair of knaves merely repeated what they had already said, discussing the points more fully, and their conversation need not be recorded. When they showed signs of separating, Tom crept back to his den to wait for a clear coast.

Nelson, however, at once came out with a lamp in his hand and passed the door of Tom's room. The latter supposed he was going to bed, but the click of a bolt beneath the pressure of a key gave the spy a new idea and he acted accordingly. He saw Nelson pass into another room and was not long in getting to the outside of the door.

His suspicion was promptly verified.

"Hallo, my pretty dear!" said the voice of young Paul. "How are your spirits, now? You look as spiteful as a cat."

"You'd better keep away, or you'll get scratched!" was the quick retort.

It was the voice of Meg Low.

"Oh! you must be joking," said Nelson, with a

chuckle. "You know I am the best friend you have and that I love you dearly."

"Bah! I'd rather have a hog love me."

"Shows poor taste on your part, my dear Meg. Now, most girls would feel highly honored by the notice of a rich man's son—"

"You had better go to them, then; I don't want any of your notice. If you know when you're well off you had better let me out of here."

"Don't you fly too high, my lady-bird!" said Nelson, angrily. "Get my temper up and you'll find me a devil. Don't forget that you are Jack Low's girl, and that there is Indian blood in your veins."

"Don't you forget it, either!" retorted Meg, quickly. "Take warning from that and don't meddle with me. I had as soon kill you as not!"

"Whew! what a spitfire you are—a perfect tigercat. I see you have got to be tamed, and here goes to do it. Come to my arms and let me embrace you, my dear!"

He advanced with an evil light in his eyes and Meg uttered a little cry, but she caught up a lamp from the table and raised it above her head.

"Come a step nearer and I will give you this!" she exclaimed.

Nelson halted, but as he did so strong arms seized him from behind and he was deftly laid upon his back.

"Ef you're hankerin' arter an embrace, hyar be I ter satisfy yer cravin's. I'm a patent huggin'-machine, warranted to keep good time an' never git out o' repair; but ther peccoliarly o' my huggin' is that I do it on ther necks o' sech bipeds ez you!"

It was the voice of Tombstone Tom, and as he talked he rolled Nelson about as a dog does a rat and prevented any outcry by a judicious compression of his neck.

Under this vigorous treatment the young villain squirmed like a crushed snake, but he was no more than a child in Tom's hands. Meg's face had grown strangely radiant at the sight of her companion, and as she was no stranger to such scenes she stood by with a composure few women could have maintained.

But Nelson suddenly became shaken as by a convulsion and, after a few contortions, lay motionless on the floor.

"Reckon ther p'izen critter hez swooned," said Tom, with some surprise. "He went off quick. It would be a good thing fur ther world ef he never come back ag'in, but he ain't one o' ther dyin' kind. Meg, be you ready to go?"

"All ready, Tom, and I thank you a thousand times—"

"Skip nine hundred an' ninety-nine on 'em. One't is enough fur me, an' you know we ain't over-an'-above good friends any way. Ef you're ready, we'll go!"

They turned away, but as they did so Nelson sprang to his feet and flew at Tom like a wildcat. He had only feigned unconsciousness to get the advantage.

But he did not get it.

Tom had wheeled, and as Nelson came rushing on he met a fist which knocked him over the table, and both he and that article of furniture went over with a tremendous crash.

Secrecy then became a thing of the past and Tombstone Tom moved with wonderful rapidity. Catching Meg's arm he ran from the room into that where he had first come and then ran out the ladder. By that time young Paul was bellowing lustily and Tom feared they would meet the revolver of the colonel. He sent Meg down the ladder and then followed in haste.

It was not until they were several rods from the house that a word was spoken. Then Tom chuckled and became his old self.

"Reckon we're all ko'rect now," he observed, "an' ef Mister Nelson don't carry 'round a black eye fur a week I'm a liar from Liarville. I hit him right in his optic."

"They will kill you, Tom."

"Not with my permission. On ther contraree, I hev an idee ther days o' glory is about past. I've got several ideas in my head, an' ef they pan out wal there is goin' ter be a shakin' up o' dry bones in Tombstun'. I'm goin' o'ter ther war-path like a devastatin' Simon-moon over ther Sarah Desert, an' ef Paul & Co., don't lose some o' their back teeth you kin chaw me fur a cabbage-head!"

CHAPTER XIX.

TOMBSTONE TOM TURNS THE TIDE.

"EASY thar on ther right flank! Turn yer toes out an' don't let ther nails scratch. Hold yer breath fur about an hour, fur this hyar is an occasion o' extreme doubt an' danger. Eyes ter ther front, an' be ready ter dodge bullets."

It was daylight again. The scene was the hills near the place where Tombstone Tom and Dan Wheelock had once been prisoners, and the young men were leading a party of miners against the retreat. This party was made up of honest men who could be depended upon in fair weather and foul, and Tom had so explained his views to Dan that the latter was somewhat nervous from anticipation.

Tom had the lead. He was the person of all others for the position, and he showed an aptness which an Indian might have envied. They crept carefully up to the entrance, to take the guard by surprise, but he was not at his post. Dan experienced a thrill of disappointment. Had the cave been deserted?

It was easy to learn and they went on for several yards when they came unexpectedly upon two men. The latter were taken by surprise, and a vigorous dash made them prisoners. Both Dan and Tom remembered seeing them in the cave during their former visit.

"Now, then," said the latter, "you perceive you are prisoners o' war an' in a situation o' extreme animosity. Rile us up an' I wouldn't give a picayune fur yer hull hides with ther taller thrown in; but ef ye answer in a becomin' way, yer chances are ez bloom'n' ez a Skye-terrier butterfly. Attention, company! How many men in hyar?"

"Five!" said one of the prisoners, sullenly.

"Whar's ther grizzly?"

"Gone! It ran away after you set it crazy that day. It killed Lieutenant Leach an' took to ther mount'ins."

"Right enough! I reckon Leach is ther man who wanted me to put a collar on Old Eph. Yes? I thought so. Sarved him right. Wal, lead ther way ter them other galoots. We want ter take them in."

The prisoners did not like the idea, but they had a due regard for their own safety and they obeyed. The other men were soon found and, being surprised and without their weapons, were easily taken. The cave had been captured without the loss of a man. Tom then addressed one of the first prisoners.

"Now, then, I'll trouble ye ter lead ther way ter yer captve."

"Thar ain't no captive here," he said.

"Neighbor, I warn ye not ter lie; it's a bad habit an' likely ter grow onto a man, like a corn on his big toe. Your high-priest, Hardy, he's gi'n up ther ghost an' you can't do him no harm. Trot out ther captve."

This time the order was imperiously given, and the fellow evidently thought best to obey, though it was done with a sullenness not to be mistaken, and he was closely watched. He led the way along a rough track for fifty yards, and then they reached a pit similar to the one in which the boys had been confined a short time before.

"I reckon ef you blow yer horn above thar, he'll rise," the cave-man observed.

"Haven't you a rope?" asked Dan, who had grown excited.

"Hyar's one," said Tom, whose keen eyes saw everything. "Let it down. I say, feller-citizen down thar, ther day o' jubilee is come, an' you kin ketch onto ther kite ef yer want'er."

"Who is there?" demanded a voice from the depths.

"Friends an' brothers, all except this galoot with a wart on his nose. Ketch hold o' this ladder an' come up."

It was thrown down, and they soon knew by its slacking that some one was ascending. Dan's face was trembling with emotion, but he was not kept long in suspense. The head of a man appeared above the pit and strong hands seized and drew him to the top. They had expected to see him half-famished and weak, but though pale, he stood firmly on his limbs and faced them eagerly.

But Dan uttered a sharp cry.

"Uncle Orlando!"

The rescued man turned in bewilderment and passed his hands several times before his eyes. The sudden light blinded him, and he had little expected to hear such words in that Arizona land.

But it was Orlando Wheelock, nevertheless, and the reader can rest assured there was no lull in the conversation for some time thereafter. Wheelock had not seen his nephew since he was a small boy, but he was soon convinced that there was no doubt about his identity; he had appeared when and where he was least expected.

There was both sorrow and pleasure in the meeting. Orlando heard of the melancholy fate of his brother, but he had long been separated from him and the olden tie was somewhat weakened.

On his own part he had a good deal to tell, but it was a story which may be briefly summarized. When on his way to Tombstone he had been set upon by armed men, captured and taken to the cave. The leader of the band was Hardy, and that person at once informed him that he was to be held for ransom. In this he was unsuccessful, for Wheelock stoutly refused to pay a dollar. Consequently, the prisoner was kept in the cave, and though he was well fed Hardy swore he should never leave alive.

Having learned this much it was not hard to understand how Hardy, failing to work his first scheme, had tried the others which have appeared in the course of our story.

The party left the interior of the cave in high spirits, taking the prisoners with them. They intended to turn them over to the people of Tombstone to be used as they saw fit, but from their knowledge of those people they did not believe they would fare very lard. They had never been a scourge to the place.

As they neared the mouth of the cave a rough voice suddenly broke upon their ears.

"Stand out o' ther way thar, yer jaw-jinglin' jack-anapes. I want yer ter understand I'm Howlin' Hank, ther Hyena from Hard Luck, an' I've got a free exit ter this place. Git out o' ther way, or I'll walk all over ther slack o' yer neck an' stomp ye nine hundred yards inter ther bowels o' ther 'arth!"

"I reckon ther Hyena is right on his muskle," said Tom. "Ef he gits arter that sentinel he'll see ther stars of ther univarsal univarse, an' hear ther music o' ther spheres clatterin' round his head."

Just then Howling Hank strode in, his rags fluttering as he walked.

"Who's ther leader o' this unwashed host, an' why be I kept out o' Paradise? I'd hev ye know I'm Howlin' Hank, ther—"

The man paused suddenly, his gaze fixed on the face of Orlando Wheelock, and put his hand to his eyes as though to brush away a mist. There was a deep hush all around as the men watched him. His face worked nervously and his gaze was wild and startled.

"I've been looking for you," he said, in a husky

whisper, "but I can't think of your name. You are—Orlando!—Orlando!"

The last words were uttered in a wild cry, and then Howling Hank fell to the ground. His cry was echoed by one from Dan, who bounded forward toward the prostrate man.

"It is father!" he cried, wildly.

A fairer day seemed to have dawned for our friends, though at the More Light Mr. Alfred Wheelock lay ill with brain fever and Pedro Castro was dying in his cabin from the effects of the blow received from Hardy. But the latter would do no more damage, for he and Sam Slasher had been found dead in each other's arms.

Colonel Paul had been forced to refund the money taken from Orlando. Both he and his worthless son deserved severer punishment, but our friends were not inclined to press the case.

Ben Kipp and Jack Low wisely left town.

No accurate account of Alfred Wheelock's wanderings would ever be had, but the fact had been established that he was shot by Sam Slasher at Hardy's bidding, for the latter knew he could not win with Paul if other heirs appeared on the scene. The bullet had plowed along his head, but though he seemed to be dead, he was only stunned, and when he came to his senses it was in a deranged condition.

Thus it was that he escaped from the hotel and village, only to return in disguise. He shaved off his full beard, removed his false teeth, put on spectacles and a coat of paint, and on his return he fooled them all; but he might never have recovered his reason had it not been for the unexpected meeting with his brother and otherwise he might always have been a wanderer in the West.

Tombstone Tom came to Dan as he was watching over his father.

"What's ther verdict o' ther jury?" he asked.

"The best. Father is sure to recover, the doctor says, and then we are all going East—father, uncle Orlando, myself and—Zoe Castro."

"Hello! I smell a mice," quoth Tom.

"I shall deny nothing. I have taken a fancy to her, and it may be we shall sometime be more than friends. She will be left friendless when her father dies, and uncle Orlando has promised to adopt her."

"That's all salubrious, an' I'm glad ter see ye think o' goin' inter partnership."

"I don't suppose you and Meg have any idea of doing the same?"

"You know my opinion o' that young woman," said Tom, severely. "She's in ther bonds o' wickedness—"

"Nonsense! She is a kind-hearted and noble girl."

"Wal, I ain't goin' ter be found raisin' my voice ag'in' a woman, an' I'm goin' ter do what I kin fur Meg. I'm goin' ter pony up ther collateral fur her ter go ter school, an' she's goin' ter shake Jack Low, an' I hope in time she will be a 'spectable member o' society."

Tom shut one eye and looked quizzically at his friend.

"You rascal!" said Dan, laughing. "I can read you better than you think. It is your odd way to talk as you do, but you are in love with Meg and I expect she will ultimately become Mrs. Tombstone Tom."

"I reckon I'll go out o' ther Tombstun' business an' strike fer other pastures; an' when you come West ag'in' you'll find me in clover knee-deep, t'arin' up ther turf an' makin' ther desert bloom like a sunflower. Mebbe you don't think as how I kin become a farmer, but ef I have sand enough ter buck ag'in' Tombstone I reckon I kin plow an' harrer an' be a prize beet from Beatville."

THE END.

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